Abstract

After a few personal tragedies shake up the life she has built in the north of Spain, Teresa returns to San José, the town of her childhood, on the eve of her fortieth birthday. Over the course of an afternoon, she reacquaints herself with all that she had left behind—the food, the music, the house, the living, and the dead. But she has come alone, without her Spanish *novio*, and has everyone thinking: Has Teresa come home for good?

Keywords

homecoming, Nueva Ecija, Filipinos in Spain

YESTERDAY WHEN I WAS YOUNG

For Maria Victoria Javier Laurena (1945–2022)

CARLO LAURENA

The eve of my fortieth birthday, Papa and I were stuck at San José's busiest intersection. Earlier this morning, he picked me up at the airport, and we headed to La Loma with a pot of moth orchids for Mama's corner of her family's mausoleum. We left Manila at lunchtime, settling for some sandwiches at a drive-through, expecting to arrive at San José in three hours barring any trouble. But we ran into a traffic jam smack in the middle of town. The stoplight at the intersection wasn't working. Under the cruel Nueva Ecija sun, traffic enforcers did their little dance, sending tricycles one way and trucks the other.

The town hummed its unbearable adagio as always. Decrepit engines whirred on as sacristans struck the torpid brass of the cathedral bells awake. No complaining. San José had always been Papa's favorite child, and me, his only daughter, in second place. It didn't help that I was too eager to leave. When they sent me to study at Assumption, I scorned fellow *provincianas* who were driven back to their estates each Friday

afternoon. If we could convince the sisters, Manila on weekends meant sushi and secret soirees. I would think of former playmates whom I left behind here with pity, those condemned to be young in San José, to wade through the hours like bogs of empty time.

Papa rolled down his window and beckoned to a traffic enforcer. I caught some words in Ilokano, words half-sung when spoken, but I didn't understand. My eyes wandered toward the cathedral. Young lovers in school uniforms had just stepped out of the *porta sancta* and onto the Spanish plaza, where a peddler was touting his skewers of curdled blood and chicken intestines. A pregnant woman held four in one hand and a plastic cup filled with vinegar. I stared at her belly until I no longer could. The car had started moving.

I looked around. Our car had begun crossing the intersection—a lonely pedestrian at an empty scramble. Other vehicles were immediately stopped. Then, the maestro with words like bells in the wind picked up his baton, conducting his orchestra of rickshaws, motorcycles, and Toyotas in decay.

"Using your *alcalde*'s charm yet again, Papa," I said.

"Just thought I should ask about this traffic." Papa raised his shoulders.

But it was the same old crossing, the same town. Just that it wasn't any other day. For the first time in a while, his daughter had come back, perhaps to stay, Papa must have hoped. Yes, *la única hija* who had long since outgrown these narrow streets. The former mayor could spare a little clout to make a good impression.

"*Dónde está tu amante gallego*?"

Papa liked to show off his Spanish. After all, he had for a mother the small yet tyrannical Bernarda Sarmiento, Spanish teacher and first woman principal of Colegio de San Sebastian, striking fear in the hearts of students each time she asked someone to conjugate infinitives or recite José Rizal's poetry. When my parents visited Galicia to meet Javier for the first time, Papa would cower imitating that serpentine lisp whenever he asked for *cerveza*. But when he and Javier found themselves alone, gazing at the Atlantic, he mustered up my grandmother's ferocity when he spoke in that phantom tongue: *oye, que no se te olvide, en otro siglo hubiéramos sido enemigos*.

"Maybe he'll come. I don't know."

"If he can handle the heat. There's a reason why this place has an Andalusian name."

As Papa fiddled with the A/C, he quoted from his favorite Lola Andang lecture: how a Spanish governor, fated to die on a galleon, had named this province after that Andalusian town he'd never see again, the town he called home. But beyond the fierce heat, where were the Moorish spires, the white houses, and the gypsy guitar of its namesake? This side of "new" Ecija had cracked cobblestones, the jarring neons of the market's canopies and parasols, and crumbling balusters and roofs of prewar houses, over which fast-food signage and the Cordilleras loomed. Nothing was ancient and nothing was all that new, as if the heat had parched the stream of time dry.

"If he doesn't come, he has to mail my necklace back."

Papa had always kept Javier at an arm's length. While Mama was excited for *mestizo* grandchildren, he disapproved of any relationship with a foreigner, especially a white man. He compared me once to Malate prostitutes who buzzed around foreigners like flies. I skipped our Sunday calls for months. Eventually, he sent a family heirloom for Javier, a necklace upon which hung a nineteenth-century golden peso with the face of Isabel II. I told him what Papa would tell me. Native apocrypha on the origins of *pera*, the Tagalog word for money. How Filipinos called Queen Isabel a bitch, *perra*, as her golden profile gained currency throughout the islands.

"So he's still mad?" Javier asked then.

"*Lo de Isabel no tiene nada que ver.* Look, the pillars of Gibraltar flanking the coat-of-arms. Back then they thought, that must be the end of the world, nothing waited beyond those pillars, but you Spaniards crossed the straits. *Plus ultra*, further beyond was your empire, further beyond were our islands."

Taking it as a symbol of a truce with Papa, if not yet his approval, Javier had begu n to wear the necklace around Coruña with pride. An image of him is seared on my mind—him leaning out of the balustrades of Paseo Marítimo to admire the sea, the coin on his neck, scintillating, almost bursting into flames. He wouldn't take it off even when we made love, and my fingers would tumble over the gold sticky with sweat. I'd nag him, *quítatelo, por favor*, but Javier wouldn't, this souvenir of the plundered New World resting so innocently on his chest, teasing me. Maybe he thought I was perhaps like any other Oriental woman, so easily conquered by amulets and charms. But I'd always thought it was him who had been subjugated by this talisman, renewing with each glimmer his hopes that my father would acquiesce, would give me away one day.

"Teresa, look." Papa pursed his lips at my window.

On our right, past the retro signage of a shoe store, was what used to be Mama's clinic. The faded panel boasting her credentials and affiliations was waiting to be taken down. The doorway was shut, now a metal tongue with grooves and grids scorched by the sun. There, Mama had started a new OB/GYN practice, to the chagrin of her Manila colleagues and San José's midwives, risking it all on this rez-de-chausée in an American-era building by the highway. Papa and I pondered its fate. *Qué será*? One of those trendy bubble tea spots? A pawnshop, a bazaar, a temple for bric-a-brac, spare parts, secondhand gizmos? Before Mama, it had been a rotisserie. What clairvoyance did she possess to see, beyond the languid spinning of decapitated chickens and pork bellies on rusty skewers, the façade of a clinic that would last three decades, defying rumors of hauntings and bad feng shui? Since then, Mama had usurped the role of breadwinner from Papa.

"*Naku*, how we fought over our first car. I told her to make do with jeepneys or tricycles, her clinic was in the middle of town. But she dreaded the commute. You know your Mama, she couldn't stand the heat and the smoke, always worrying about her skin and her hair. Pregnant women wouldn't go to ugly OBs, she was convinced."

Papa drawled on as we passed the clinic, resisting another glance. The highway grew wider on its northern tail, the mountains more impressive, as we drove away from the center.

"Are you hungry?"

He parked at an eatery owned by the Marquezes, the only decent restaurant within a fifty-kilometer radius. Right before getting down, a familiar strain from the radio crept in all garbled. *Yesterday, when I was young*. Papa let his hand linger on the ignition. Then the engine died and with it the song.

It wasn't such a bad idea, that first car: a Toyota Corolla, nothing like his new red Mazda fitted with Bluetooth and a touch screen. In its time, it strode the streets like a royal carriage among rickshaws. So while Mama was at her clinic doing ultrasounds and pap smears, Papa could take me to salon appointments, catechism, piano lessons—all of which I protested. Instead of coaxing me, he would scold me, spank me, his temples red and almond eyes cracked wide, though his roaring was mellowed down by his Ilokano cadence. Then to perhaps apologize, he'd take me to the Marquezes for a plate of *palabok*, rice vermicelli lathered

with shrimp broth, thick like a gravy, dyed orange with achuete. And because he was mayor, I'd get extra pork rind and calamansi, something I took for granted.

When I miscarried, palabok was the only thing I wanted to eat.

The Marquezes' restaurant was strangely crowded this afternoon, a few hours before closing. It was at lunchtime when the place would swell with hungry customers fleeing the midday sun. During siesta hours was the best time to go for some *hopia* or *halo-halo*, all quiet except for whatever drifted in from the owners' radio: a dispute settled on air, plaintive calls about being mired in debt or a lover's infidelity, a Manila Sound classic, *if you only knew, you're the superstar of my life!* This time the kitchen was busy. A tourist bus had parked on the other side of the street. Foreigners had flocked in, gazing at trays with curious stews: goat innards in a broth of bile and tamarind, pork stewed in vinegar and pig's blood, and the tamer *kaldereta*, beef stewed in tomato, coconut milk, and liver pate, a dish the tour guide described as a rendang without spice or a bourguignon without wine.

No waiters or sommeliers at the Marquezes: You pick up a tray, you point, then the kitchen ladies come with their greasy hairnets and ladles to ration out whatever strikes your fancy. Like a giddy schoolgirl at a cafeteria, I held out my tray to get the palabok. An elderly couple, sporting their souvenir buri hats, held up the queue to pay. Armed with nothing more than a smattering of English, they struggled with half-formed questions before resorting to phrases in Spanish, which they assumed Filipinos must still somehow understand.

"What's in it?" the woman asked in Spanish.

The kitchen lady grimaced, scratching her scalp, rummaging her head for cognates in Ilokano and Tagalog that she could spew out. I stepped in, explaining that here, they put more tamarind than bile in the *pinapaitan*. That the Marquezes cleaned the tripe and the intestines very well; Papa knew firsthand. They must have been Argentine or Uruguayan. I could tell from the River Plate accent, the way they pronounced their *y*'s and *ll*'s as if hushing or whispering to a child. I asked where they were headed.

"We are on our way to the rice terraces in Banaue. You speak Spanish well. Are you from here?"

"My family is from here. *Vivía en España*."

I helped the couple finish their orders and pay. Perhaps to say thanks they, ordered the bitter goat stew. I introduced them to my father as we

looked for an empty table to sit on. Papa let out a furtive sigh of relief when we separated—no table big enough for the four of us. Couldn't understand anything, Papa whispered. I giggled as I spun the noodles around my fork. Half an hour later, they waved goodbye. Their bus was leaving for the rice terraces up north.

"You know, Javier found someone who could make palabok in Coruña."

I told Papa about Aling Marisol. Javier, who knew my hollow womb was on some hunger strike against God, had scoured the whole city for authentic Filipino food, hoping he could wean me off nibbles of cuttlefish and white wine. Coruña didn't have a Jollibee like Madrid, or vermouth bars in Barcelona run by Filipinos who served *sisig* to those who knew to ask. But he was able to find someone, a Filipino maid who worked for an affluent Portuguese family in nearby Santa Cruz. After passing by the Asian grocery along Rúa Panaderas, Javier took Aling Marisol home to cook at our Monte Alto apartment. While I stared at waves crashing against the hill of the Roman lighthouse, I eavesdropped on the conversation in the kitchen. No achuete at the supermarket, permission to improvise with paprika and saffron to get the color right. Smoked anchovies as a *tinapa* substitute. It's not going to taste the same, Aling Marisol warned, nothing ever does, as she was deep-frying pork rind, quarrelling with Javier whether to call them *torreznos* or *chicharrón* or *bagnet*.

"Was it as good as this?" Papa scooped up the last of his noodles, savoring the scallions, the crushed peanuts.

That day, as Aling Marisol brought the improvised palabok to my lap, she asked me how I was in Tagalog infected by Castilian agility, almost incomprehensible. She started with questions like if Javier and I were married or if we were just "live-in". Then she rambled about *aswang* sightings in Galicia. A popular rumor among OFWs in Spain: A pilgrim had found the lower extremities of a woman while camping out along the Camino to Santiago de Compostela. Maybe, Teresa *hija*, you've been a victim, you just didn't know. Aling Marisol had her own take on the lore, claiming that these tropical vampires didn't have to suck out fetuses with long tongues. All it took was the flutter of an evil eye to make the baby slip from your uterus.

I wanted to spit the palabok out, curse her, *loka-loka!* This is why nothing changes in the Philippines! This is why they think we're still the same brown islanders whom they named those chocolate biscuits after. I waited until she left. Then I shattered all our finest Sargadelos porcelain

in front of Javier. *Joder,* Javi, is it that hard to shut up? *Fue mi hijo también, Teresa*, he said. That night, I slept on the floor beside blue and white shards of broken dinnerware. He slept God knows where.

"Of course it wasn't as good, Papa," I answered, looking away.

The house was a short drive north of the Marquezes' restaurant, toward the direction of the Cordilleras. From the highway, you turn right to a dirt road that feels as unbearably narrow as the dykes of the rice paddies around it. Then you pass through the dilapidated arch, Villa Sarmiento, where during elections we would hang posters with my father's face, so colorful they seemed like fiesta bunting. Just beyond it was the unassuming gate of the family estate.

No sooner had Papa honked than Eduardo opened the gate. Eduardo was stockier now, with grays in his hair. He always seemed to wear the same wifebeater to show off his tattooed arms. Papa stopped the car to drop me off by the *glorieta,* the garden summerhouse with its cracked paint, invaded by bougainvillaea and bellflowers. At the center was a creaky rattan coffee table. In a corner, a *silla perezosa*. Here, one could linger for hours—that is, if one could bear the heat and mosquitos. Eduardo awkwardly wished me a happy birthday in advance, and did I want anything to drink? I said I was good. He was rushing, offering to park for Papa.

I looked around and saw Mama's wheelchair folded and stowed by the Virgin Mary grotto, just a few steps away from the cottage.

"Why haven't you gone inside?" Papa wiped his sweaty temples with his handkerchief. I let him open the door.

The *sala* had an old ceiling fan, wicker furniture with cushions unlike the bare ones outside, a window through which the dragon fruit trellises could be seen. On the credenza was an improvised altar: a crucifix, several rosaries, one I recognized with its nacre beads and the shell of Santiago, statues of Sto. Niño and the Manaoag Virgin, flanked by pots of drooping orchids and melted votives. Against a wall, the upright piano, the closest thing I had to a sibling, draped with a red runner held fast by framed photographs, certificates, and trophies.

On this piano, she made me play chansons popular in this side of the world in translation: Dusty Springfield's *The Windmills of Your Mind*, Connie Francis' *I Will Wait for You*, and of course, her favourite, Shirley Bassey's *Yesterday When I Was Young*. She had Papa burn the songs on a CD so her secretaries could put them on for patients in the waiting

lounge, *trés chic*. When I heard the Charles Aznavour original on exchange in Toulouse, I felt my first bout of homesickness, recalling my *siestas* on those cushioned chairs as I waited for Mama to finish her consults and rounds, the chansons' melodies bloating in the hot air.

Hier encore, j'avais vingt ans, je caressais le temps, et jouais de la vie. The perfect song to learn the imperfect tense, which is a tad difficult to wrap your head around.

Across the piano was some alcove, which for a while had been cleared out for makeshift sleeping quarters. The Japanese divider was still spread out, though it no longer concealed a bed and a potty. Here in this living room, Mama had died, shortly before I miscarried. Sitting on her wheelchair, facing the window, she was just asleep, they thought. They only checked when they feared, by the stench, that she had soiled herself. Though she had already gone blind, Mama died looking out the window, because Papa told her the cacti had begun bearing its pink fruit.

It's true, that old adage about doctors being terrible patients. For the longest time, Mama had refused treatment, worried about her looks. She argued with colleagues, not accepting she had become their ward. Most children think their parents are infallible, indomitable. In my mind, Mama had always been eternally thirty. It's funny, my parents always used their inevitable death against me, to startle me into getting it together. Listen, Teresa, I'm at risk of heart disease, your father's predisposed to diabetes, you'll get it too if you don't change your diet. Or: Teresa, if you don't save, you'll be begging on the streets, what's gonna happen to you when we die? And yet to me they were just bluffing like players over cards.

The keys were blanketed with dust. Some had sunk and gotten stuck when shocked with a sforzando. The chords and the melody were predictable enough that I could play it by ear. *Yesterday when I was young, the taste of life was sweet as rain upon my tongue*. This was Mama's eleven o'clock karaoke number, her encore, emulating Shirley Bassey in her gestures, in her scansion, her panache. The same woman who'd later end up blue and breathless, heaving out blood no sooner than having raised her voice in a conversation.

I teased at life as if it were a foolish game, the way the evening breeze may tease a candle flame. Mama capitulated to her doctor's orders, and a spell was undone. On each Facetime call, I'd notice that her hair had thinned out, her shoulder blades and elbows bursting through what little flesh she had left. I wasn't there when she died. They would meet me in Manila when

I could fly home, but I never really stayed or drove out here. Out of fear for my pregnancy, for my job, my residence permit. Avoiding the tough conversations, the will, the house, the insurance, the burial plot. Coruña had a cemetery facing the sea, wouldn't she have loved that?

The splendid things I planned, I always built alas on weak and shifting sand. Mama lost her vision, which she said she preferred to going deaf. At least she wouldn't be able to look into a mirror. She could still listen to her favorite chansons. Come home for good, Teresa, play the piano, Papa urged me. Her eyes were obsidian marbles that refused any twinkle of light. There was nothing left of that vampiric charm so attractive to her patients. She once made an awful joke about an aswang who never starved nor aged because she was an obstetrician by day. Oh, Aling Marisol would have loved that one!

The squeals of a little girl cut through the notes of the piano. Eduardo's wife Bea had entered, waiting by the doorway. She was hushing her child with a threatening slipper in one hand.

"Manang Teresa, *pasensiya na*. Your room is ready. When will Javier come?"

"Let her, Bea."

Manang, Bea called me older sister in Ilokano though I was younger. Her daughter tugged at my shirt. I helped her sit on the piano stool. As Bea led me to my room, the dissonant storm brewing under the girl's tiny fingers thundered throughout the house. Bea's daughter must have been around the same age when I first started my lessons.

My room, stripped of a teenage girl's odds and ends, had been turned into a guest room. A Sorolla reproduction, Valencian women in white lace dresses at the beach, hung above my vanity. Beside it, a photograph of Mama holding my hand when I still had that atrocious bob and that sloth soft toy—the only marker that the room was once my territory.

On the nightstand was a marble bowl of rattan berries. It was harvest season, the wicker was being sold to furniture makers and the sour fruit to vendors at markets along delivery routes. My obsession with it was genetic. Mama loved slathering the greenest mangoes with *bagoong* despite her bouts of hyperacidity. Me, I preferred the fruit of the rattan, though it always pained me to tear apart their beautiful scales. When I was a child, I used to think they were snake eggs, and the farmers' wives gave me nightmares with their taunting, Teresita, a serpent will grow in your belly!

"Manang, we're making *sinigang na pompano* for dinner. We'll sour the broth with rattan. Is that okay with you?"

"Sounds delicious."

"Eduardo will bring your suitcases in a bit."

As I peeled a few rattan berries, I noticed, on my vanity, a keepsake box of what was left of my mother's jewelry. Some earrings and bracelets had been handed over to my aunts and cousins. Mama had a personal jeweler who'd visit her at the summerhouse. They'd spend hours examining gems, negotiating prices, and gossiping. I was eavesdropping when my mother haggled for this necklace of teeth-like saltwater pearls with rubies. I begrudged my mother such luxuries, especially when she refused me far cheaper dresses or toys, citing platitudes like money doesn't grow on trees. Or a vulgar variation when impatient or furious, do you think we shit cash Teresa?

Kids like you won't understand, don't let it get to your head, she'd say, knowing I had sunk my teeth into the apple. You can't take it to the grave, Teresa. So you must be immortal, Mama, to adorn your chest with something worth a car. But the truth is she never really wore it, aside from when I graduated with my master's in Madrid. I was trying it on when Eduardo knocked on the door.

"So beautiful, Manang. *Bienvenida*." Eduardo said as he brought in my suitcases.

When I was a teenager, Eduardo was in his twenties. So young, but already my father's right hand: He was chauffeur, mechanic, campaign advisor, foreman, bodyguard all at once. My family had taken him in as a refugee from his alcoholic father, a distant relative, who beat him black and blue. He was handsome. Whenever he accompanied Papa to the city hall, he'd don a *barong* with shades to match. In the dirty kitchen, I'd glimpse him in his undershirt, cracking bawdy jokes to make Bea laugh, showing her his arms, hardened from lifting heavy boxes of goods and flyers during campaign season. When Papa had resigned from local politics, Eduardo spent his days bent and scathed by the sun while tending to onion beds or dragon fruit cacti across the farm. He had *piel canela* as the song goes, legs and arms like barks of cinnamon.

I embraced Eduardo, thanked him for the suitcases. Javier was coming, and the two would have to meet. Once, he and I talked about previous relationships. The closest thing, I confessed, was my unrequited affection for Eduardo. My fellow *colegialas* called me *puta* for hooking

up with the boys they liked. They spread rumors about how my vagina smelled, laughed about diphthongs and syllables I tinged with an accent. Soon enough, those Jesuit-school boys in their Ralph Lauren shirts began to steer clear of me. Only Eduardo, who'd drive me back to San José on holidays, was kind. I yearned for him because he was older, sturdier, nothing like those Manila brats who'd whine and wilt in the savage heat of our plains.

The echoes of Eduardo's pleas to his daughter—come now, piano time's over—drifted in as I rummaged for clothes to change into. Sundown made the house glow a deceptive scarlet. Here, the hottest afternoon could break into a storm. I thought it best to take a shower soon.

In the shower, I remembered the conversation I had with those tourists. I cringed at a mistake I made. *Vivía en España, vivir,* "to live" conjugated in the imperfect. I chose the imperfect past, as if my life in Spain had abruptly come to an end. I had always struggled with past tenses in Spanish and French. The rule: imperfect for descriptions or continuous actions that could be interrupted, preterite or passé composé for actions completed within a specified period of time. It would be unnatural to say *Eduardo fue guapo* as if he only looked good for a month. But there was something sore about the imperfect, too. Eduardo *era guapo*. Eduardo used to be handsome, then what? Yesterday, I "had" twenty years. Then I lost them? Papa used to be mayor. Mama used to be beautiful. What conspiracy of fate had caused the verb to slip through our fingers, to keep us from perfecting the action? When things began to sour with Javier, he badgered me in the imperfect tense. *Nos reíamos, nos bailábamos, me querías, Teresa*. He shouted as I left to stay with a friend in Barcelona, before catching a flight bound for the Philippines.

Suddenly there were gusts howling and rattling the walls of the house. I stepped out of the shower expecting the faded warmth of the day, but the air in the corridor had cooled down from the rain and brushed like a fleeting winter against my moist skin. From the windows of my room, I could see banana shrubs, palms, and reeds all bent in resistance against the storm, fronds and trunks entangling with wires and cables.

The power went out. Bea bellowed, *brownout, brownout!* Eduardo fumbled around in the darkness to turn on the generator. Likewise, I crept around my room, trusting whatever vestiges of memory I still had in my feet to lead me back to the bathroom where I'd left a few things. But I

tripped and crashed into a sharp edge of an unfamiliar piece of furniture, some forgotten corner turned hostile.

Currents of throbbing pain ran through my body. In the faint glow of distant emergency lanterns, I could make out a tiny puddle of blood. The generator droned over the rain pummeling the roof. Then a sudden flash of light from revived chandeliers and sconces washed the space around me amber. As soon as I glimpsed the spots of blood, I shrieked. The blood on the broken nail and the wounded flesh had thickened, but the sting crept up my hips and my belly. I was thrust back into that night when Javier found me on the floor, filthy with blood smeared all over my underwear, my thighs, my palms. He was shirtless, and the gold coin on his chest glowed each time the lighthouse cast its beam in our direction. I was on that hospital table again, numb from the cold gel, my insides probed, prodded, the doctor scraping away the fibres of my unformed child. *Mi madre era obstetra como usted, Doctora*, I remember saying, to initiate some small talk, wishing Mama had been there. Yes, I wanted her there, not so much to be coddled and cradled but for her to do it herself, dig out her own grandchild's bones from the graveyard inside me.

Papa and Eduardo came to lift me and propped me up on the edge of my bed, carefully since I was hysterical, naked under my bathrobe. Papa sat on a chair and watched as Eduardo wrapped my foot with a bandage. The first time we received death threats, he sent Eduardo to stay in Manila. I had just turned eighteen then, Eduardo almost thirty. I was miserable, and I seduced him after a night out with friends. He wouldn't touch me, loyal as he was to Papa. And yet gossip spread, and it spread swiftly and hyperbolic. Mama slapped me with the back of her bejewelled hand and left me with a bleeding, fissured cheek. Then she cursed Papa, swearing to never lend him another peso if all we got in exchange was the paranoia of scandal or worse, death by his opponents' bullets.

It had always been a crime in this house to show any tenderness. Even after my uncle Ludovico's assassination, we didn't dare to wail or throw ourselves at the coffin. Our farm animals had grieved more honestly each time we slaughtered a suckling pig or a rabid dog! The threats were like prophecies come true, and one morning, we found Tito Ludo's corpse spread out on the dirt road outside the farm, half his head like an orange trampled underfoot, his brains spilled into the rice paddies. Even then, Papa betrayed no sign of fragility other than an occasional stutter in his declamations, worried he might lose the confidence of voters if he showed

any more. But I can vividly recall how I stared at his profile as he gazed into the pit where his brother's coffin was being lowered.

To outlive the dead, the dying, and the living, one needed a heart of marble. Statues and memorials are made of marble, after all. When the guidance counselor rang my parents after glimpsing the cuts on my wrists and shoulders, the first thing Mama said was: Go on, kill yourself, Teresa, I dare you, as she drove me to my favorite Japanese restaurant in Greenbelt. Or in university, when I blacked out on the curb by a club along Pasong Tamo, Mama pulled my hair, called me slut and whore, as she cleaned the vomit off my legs. And before I left for Spain, instead of farewell embraces, they sent me off with admonitions. Teresa, why don't you just pursue medicine or law? Teresa, you won't earn enough teaching English. Teresa, if something happens to you, we won't be there to help or bail you out. Teresa, hija, just take life seriously and stay put. *Cariño brutal*, elders liked to call it, though the phrase made little sense over in the peninsula.

Eduardo's daughter held out a glass of soursop juice with both hands and wide, googly eyes. I took a sip, and soon enough I was breathing fine. The storm had passed, the night was warm but far from muggy.

"You're all set, Manang. Just don't lean your weight onto this foot."

"Teresa, when you're ready, dinner's outside. Eat first, then take one." Papa handed me mild painkillers. He wasn't a doctor, but he had always been Mama's apprentice. "Maybe tomorrow we can go to Dingalan for the day. You must miss the sea."

I lingered in my bathrobe after they left, until a chill urged me to put on some clothes. I wore a dress with spaghetti straps and floral print, the kind a tourist would wear around Barcelona, to match open-toed sandals. And though it was nighttime, I spritzed on my day perfume and the scent of orange blossoms filled the air. I put on Mama's ruby necklace, admiring myself in the mirror. Then I made up my mind to call Javier.

"Javi, I'm home. I just had to stub my toe and yank my nail out, *la tonta que soy*."

"At least you arrived safely. *Me alegro*. Does it still hurt?

"Not so much anymore. *Escucha*, Javier, I'm thinking of quitting Inditex once I get my passport."

I wanted to say many things to fill the silence. Javier, I've crossed the straits and I might just stay for good, in this town where the cathedral bells could be heard from every corner, where the Cordillera's silhouette

imposes itself upon each northward glance. Yes, maybe I could stay here, with Papa. Maybe you could come, too! I wanted to say more, though finding the words was always arduous for someone like me, daughter of Mama and Papa, for whom genuine affection was squandered through cloying apologies and declarations of love.

"They're asking about you. They want to roast a pig. Papa wants to take us to Dingalan. It's just a town, nothing like Coruña, but at least the Pacific's always warm for a dip."

Javier's chuckle had petered out into hissing, threatening static.

"Javi, *pero vienes, no*?"

"*Feliz cumpleaños, mi Teresita … pero Filipinas está muy lejos, no sé. Quería, sí, iba pero al final, no puedo.*"

I pushed my phone aside, tugged at my hair, took a deep breath across the mirror. Then I gasped, thinking I had seen Mama's ghost, before bursting into laughter and sighs of relief. It was my gaze that had pricked me, sharpened by the red of the rubies. I was beginning to look like Mama at the height of her glory, before the pallor had set in her skin, before the obsidian eyes. I took off the necklace and settled for a simpler pearl collar. I walked away from the dresser, grabbed a bottle of Catalan vermouth from my suitcase on the floor, and glanced one last time at the mirror before leaving. No more phantoms. I was alone now, and I was not as beautiful as Mama.

With each step down the stairs, the singing grew louder, the bass from a speaker more formidable. I could hear Papa's guffaws and interjections in Ilokano amid the chiming of glasses and utensils. At first, no one noticed how I staggered toward the summerhouse. When Bea saw me struggling, she rushed to guide me to my seat. The karaoke machine cast its colorful images upon the garden and illuminated the faces of Papa's companions: neighbors, distant relatives, workers at the farm whom he invited to stay up until midnight. They all wished me a happy birthday. Some approached and offered the back of their hand for a *mano po*. Bea had gone into the kitchen and returned with a clay pot of hot sinigang. It didn't seem like it, but it was quite a decadent meal. Rattan was more sour and expensive than tamarind. It left behind a faint sweetness that paired well with the miso and the pompano's fatty flesh. You couldn't find this anywhere else in the world.

As I had my dinner, they serenaded me with off-key renditions of Sinatra and Rey Valera hits. Eduardo, tipsy from beer, dedicated a

miserable attempt at a David Pomeranz song to Bea, who covered her reddened cheeks with the buri fan she used to shoo mosquitoes away from the food. Then it was Papa's turn again. He too dedicated a song to me, and the renewed attention was embarrassing for someone who was chewing and spitting out fishbones. Papa chose *Noche de Ronda*, his favorite track from a Pilita Corrales record. *Luna que se quiebra sobre las tinieblas de mi soledad,* the chorus goes. His companions, all merry thanks to his rum, ballyhooed, hearing his Spanish. That's Lola Andang's son, no doubt about it! I whispered to Bea, do we have oranges? She went inside and quickly returned with orange slices for the vermouth. I opened the bottle that, after some coaxing, Bea and Eduardo drank from, the three of us like spectators at a Spanish cabaret.

Papa then passed the microphone to me. I pushed it away. His companions cheered—*ayan na, la kastila, isa lang garod, Manang*—and I acquiesced, just one *ha*, I'm still jet-lagged. The glossy binder made its way to my lap, a hefty catalogue of songs, encyclopedic in its range: the usual karaoke repertoire, current chart-toppers, folk airs, forgotten disco hits, titles in Korean, Mandarin, Japanese, even Spanish. Had I not known which song I wanted, it would've taken me ages. I pressed the code, then the first few chords blared right away.

Yesterday when I was young, so many lovely songs were waiting to be sung. I looked for it under Dusty Springfield or Shirley Bassey, but it was listed as Helen Gamboa's song, and the arrangement was *kundiman*-like, slower, more somber. Papa gazed at the television, mouthing the words. *I ran so fast that time and youth at last ran out, I never stopped to think what life was all about*. My voice shivered. I felt a thorn in the back of my mouth, a fishbone maybe, a seed? Then I caught it, I knew what it was. The quivering of an abyss that had opened up, tugging stronger and stronger at my father's bright voice after each loss in the family. That tremolo, borne on the crests and troughs of a long-distance call, worming its way through that cold, humid Galician morning when he rang to say, *Teresa, Mama has died*. Yes, it was my father's tremolo, trapped in my own voice.

Could they notice the slurred words, the overshot notes, the missed beats? Mama had always sung this without trembling. Back when she had no yesterdays to regret, and this song was nothing more than a maudlin tune for careless whistling and humming. No, I could never sing it like her. But I had my own maneuveres against falling apart. *En mi ayer, la*

vanidad me hacía malgastar mi alegre juventud. Yesterday, vanity made me waste my happy youth—goes the Spanish version.

Recuerdos del ayer que ya se fue. And so I finished the song in a borrowed tongue, a veil that kept me hidden from all save for Papa. The karaoke spun its roulette of scores, the drum roll crescendoed into laudatory trumpets. And there I was on my feet, like a marble statue, though the imperfect tense ached in some recess deep within my marble heart.

Everyone cheered. Teresa, you sounded like Pilita Corrales, like a true Spaniard. Someone requested another *bolero*, why don't you sing *Bésame mucho* or *Historia de un amor*? Amid the inebriate whistling and slapping of thighs, I stepped toward Papa to bring him some vermouth. Yet he continued to gaze into the screen now silent, waiting for its cue. He stared as if it were a portal into something beyond, like the Pillars of Hercules, as if waiting for some secret to be revealed in that infinite loop of animated dancers and stock videos of lovers. In half an hour, the clock would strike twelve, and I'd turn forty. For an instant, I looked away, distracted when I overheard someone ask Eduardo my age and he joked: Manang's turning fourteen, not forty. Then I looked back at my father from the side, as I did at my uncle's funeral, when I was still that young girl, ready to flee, ready to leave it all behind. Yes, I looked at him the same way, and I made out, on the corner of his eye, what could have been the glimmer of a tear. Or perhaps, it was the light of the moon gliding through a new furrow on his face, a sign that Papa, after all, was just as mortal as Mama and the rest of us were.