





SEA MAGIC

“We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.”
—T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”



THE SUMMER OF 1997 was the summer of growing up for Luis. *Gimik* was airing on Channel 2, and so was a badly dubbed version of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Kuya Germs was on GMA 7—as he had always been—and RPN 9 had a series of anime shows, including *Dragon Ball Z*. MTV was the king of cool, playing grunge, pop, and hip-hop hits, presented by the muse of MTV herself, Donita Rose, the coolest girl in the universe and the crush of every boy at school. There was *X-Men* and *Street Fighter* and the brand-new *X-Men vs. Street Fighter* video game that caused the world to flock to the arcade on the top floor of Robinsons Galleria.

Luis turned twelve amid all these things. But unlike his classmates, he didn't quite know how a twelve-year-old boy ought to think, act, or feel. The other boys at school had run headlong into a mad whirlwind of teenage things: baggy jeans, oversized polo shirts, R&B anthems (such as “I'll Be Missing You” and “Gangsta's Paradise”), Splash hair gel, an appearance of angst, as well as the upcoming dance with the girl's school across the creek. Luis was mildly familiar with some of these things—Splash hair gel, for example—but that was about as far as his understanding went. The age of twelve was confusing territory for him. It was like he was constantly being rushed forward by some unknown force. He didn't know where he was being rushed to and the reason behind all the rushing.



Summers for Luis were always spent by the sea. From as far back as he could remember, his parents would take him to the seaside town of Lian, in Batangas, where they would spend Holy Week in their house on the beach. They usually went with Luis' cousins and their grandparents. It was a yearly pilgrimage for them, and this year was no exception. The only difference this time around was that Luis' parents had decided to bring along friends from the office instead. This summer, it would be just them and the Del Mundos.

Luis knew Mr. and Mrs. Del Mundo from the many afternoons he had spent doing his homework amid towering stacks of newsprint. The Del Mundos were his parents' business partners in the printing press along Quezon Avenue. He had always addressed them as Mr. and Mrs. Del Mundo, but now that they were sharing the same house for an entire week, they insisted that he drop the formality and call them Tito Sam and Tita Dina. Luis wasn't comfortable calling them *tito* and *tita*, but he decided to play along.

And then there was their daughter, Ana. She was about the same age as Luis, and she attended the girls' school across the creek. Like Luis, it was also Ana's summer of growing up. She was about the same height as Luis, fair skinned, rosy cheeked, and with flouncy hair that fell to just below her shoulders. Some of the boys at school had a serious crush on her. As for Luis though, he never managed to develop a liking for Ana. It was probably because of the many parties they had as children in which they were forced to play with each other, sit with each other, eat with each other, and be friends. There was even that one Christmas party a few years back—Luis was sure that Ana would remember this, too—when they had to dress up as Joseph and Mary and reenact the Nativity. They did it with much displeasure. Ana was made to carry a doll that was supposed to be the Baby Jesus. Because the entire affair was rather rushed, the person assigned to purchase the doll wasn't able to check for defects in the merchandise. The doll arrived a few minutes before the show. It was plump, blond, and magnificently cross-eyed. Luis and Ana had to sit with the unfortunate thing in a makeshift *belen* as the priest said mass and the staff of the printing press sang Christmas carols all around them. Some of the staff would look their way and gush at the sight of Luis with his long beard and Ana in her powder blue dress. They had halos around their heads made of painted illustration boards. The doll in swaddling clothes sat on Ana's lap, looking up at Luis with an expression



of permanent befuddlement. In its sad, cross-eyed way, the doll pleaded for Luis to end its misery.

Luis was always under the impression that his and Ana's parents were creating situations where the two of them could get to know each other. It was like they were being herded into a coral that got smaller and smaller as the years went by. Their parents were probably thinking that Luis and Ana could develop a friendship that would later on progress into—of all things—marriage. From a business standpoint, it was both practical and ideal. He and Ana had no other siblings, so the responsibility of continuing the business fell squarely upon their shoulders. It was as if they were destined to be together. But Luis didn't want anything to do with the printing press, nor did he want anything to do with Ana. For some reason, he was sure that she felt the same way.

When both families arrived at the beach house after a good three-hour car ride, the first thing Luis did was go up to his bedroom to avoid any encounters with Ana. He unpacked his clothes and threw them on the bed. From the depths of his backpack, Luis pulled out his discman. It was a recent birthday gift from his parents. He then retrieved a CD from the front pocket of his backpack. Luis wore his earphones, popped in the CD, and pressed play. He wanted to drown out all the noises of the world—the cheerful banter from downstairs, the fussing about the food, the merry sounds of a kitchen coming to life, and his mother, whom he knew would most certainly come looking for him. He was expecting to be reprimanded for being antisocial. Luis wanted to sleep. If he was lucky, he would fall asleep for the rest of the day, and maybe even for the rest of the week.

The CD playing in his discman was the only CD Luis owned. It was a collection of random songs which he had asked his classmate, James, to burn. Luis wasn't really into music, but of what use was a discman if he didn't have any CDs? Luis didn't know a lot of songs, so he just gave James a few songs that he wanted on the CD. The rest of the songs were up to James and his more sophisticated musical tastes. The CD ended up having a bunch of R&B hits and one song that Luis knew by heart. It was his all-time favorite since he was a kid—"Kokomo" by the Beach Boys. Luis remembered that it was on one of their earlier beach trips that he had heard the song playing on the car's radio. It was his parents' idea to play "Kokomo" so as to get everybody in a beachy mood. The moment Luis heard that song, he refused to listen to anything else. His parents soon regretted ever playing it.



Luis folded his arms behind his head. As he listened to “Kokomo,” he tried to figure out what it was about the song that had captivated him so much. He remembered rewinding their old cassette tape over and over again, until the radio in their living room conked out, taking the tape with it. He exploded into tears when he realized that there would no longer be any *Kokomo* in the house. For many nights, he would cry, “Kokomo! ‘Kokomo!’” depriving his parents of much needed sleep. He made such a big fuss about it that his parents decided to buy a new radio and a new Beach Boys cassette tape to appease his four-year-old temper. “Kokomo” became the soundtrack of Luis’ summers, as well as of his childhood. It was also the soundtrack of his parents’ summers, but that was because they had no other choice. Luis loved to sing “Kokomo” whenever and wherever he could. He would sing it in bed, in the bathroom, and in the car. He would also sing it while they did the groceries, ate in restaurants, and visited other people’s houses. Luis knew all the words to the song and, in his squeaky voice, imposed it upon everybody. The lyrics were easy to remember since they were mostly the names of Caribbean islands: “Arbua, Jamaica, ooooooh, I wanna take you to / Bermuda. . . .”

With the music of the Beach Boys playing in his ears, Luis was set adrift on a dream boat that pushed off from a sandy shore and sailed over the waves of a turquoise sea—“Off the Florida Keys”— so the song went—to a place called Kokomo. The sun was dipping into the horizon, and the sky was streaked with orange and purple hues. A lazy breeze blew in through the open window, teasing the strands of hair that fell across Luis’ forehead. Soon, it would be night.

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What Luis loved most about their yearly trips to the beach were the nights. When he was a little boy, Luis and his parents would take strolls along the shore after dinner. The sea would be irresistible on those nights—beautiful, dark, and vast as it glowed silver by the light of the moon. The sky would be so clear that the whole universe seemed encrusted with stars. It didn’t take long to spot one streak across the sky and disappear into the darkness. Whenever he was on the beach, Luis would stare out into the sea and get lost in the immensity of it all.

When he was big enough to walk on the beach by himself, he would sneak out at night just to admire at the sea. His favorite spot was a wooden





dock not too far from their house. It extended from an outcropping of rocks that acted as a breakwater separating their property from the neighboring beach resort. Luis loved to sit at the end of the dock where his feet could dangle free and touch the surface of the incoming tide. His parents always told him not to go to the dock since it was old and could collapse at any time. He never heeded their warning though, since he had already gone to the dock several times before and nothing bad had ever happened. The only challenge with getting there was that he had to evade a thorny cluster of aroma bushes that grew by the rocks. One needed to step onto the rocks while being mindful of the wall of thorns to the right. For a small boy like him, this often meant clambering up on all fours, especially when it was dark and the tide was high. After a few tries though, negotiating the rocks became easier for Luis.

He was seven years old when it happened. Luis made his way to the dock one night when he was sure that his parents were asleep. He climbed the rocks and walked all the way to the end of the dock, where he sat down to admire the sea. He started singing “Kokomo” as he let his toes glide along the surface of the water. He looked out into the horizon and imagined pirate ships sailing in the distance. He imagined sea serpents, too, coiling around the pirate ships, which retaliated with muskets and cannon balls. There were desert islands with treasure chests and skeletons half-buried in the sand, and beneath the waves were mermaids, submarines, and vast undersea kingdoms of coral castles and seaweed hills—“We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow / That’s where we wanna go / Way down to Kokomo.” Luis yawned as he babbled the rest of the song.

The sound of the waves lulled him. He nodded his sleepy head as a cool breeze blew in from the sea. It was late, and Luis thought that he probably needed to head back. While half asleep, Luis made his way back to the shore. As he was about to clamber down the rocks, a stray branch from the aroma bush caught the sleeve of his sweater, cutting the side of his hand. It was as if the bush had reached out a thorny branch and whipped it in the air. Luis winced and he quickly drew the wound to his mouth. The cut looked deep and certainly felt that way. When Luis turned seven earlier that summer, his parents told him that seven-year-old boys were no longer allowed to cry. He wasn’t supposed to cry. But the cut was painful, and Luis was all alone on the beach. He sat on the dock and wrapped his hand in the sleeve of his sweater. Soon, he allowed the tears to roll down his cheeks.





Luis looked down at his hand and saw that the wound had stained his sweater. Somebody should probably grab a pair of garden shears and cut the aroma bush down to a stump. He should probably do that himself. The bush rustled behind him as he nursed his wounded hand. But the night had stilled, and there was no breeze. It took him a while to realize the rustling in the bush wasn't because of the wind.

Luis turned to see where the noise was coming from. That was when he saw her—a strange girl pushing her way through the bramble of thorns. She seemed unbothered as she whisked aside the thorny branches with her bare hands. The girl skipped her way out of the aroma bush, smoothed her dress, and stood next to Luis. The moonlight fell upon her pale skin, and she sparkled like the sea. When she smiled, Luis knew that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

The girl lifted the hem of her skirt and sat next to him on the dock. She let her feet glide on the surface of the water. The girl was so close to Luis that their shoulders almost brushed against each other. This was the closest Luis had ever been to a girl, and the sight of her made him forget about the cut in his hand. The tears had stopped rolling down his cheeks, but he knew that there were still traces of them clinging to his eyelashes. Then his cheeks flushed with a sudden twinge of embarrassment. What if she was there the entire time? What is she had heard him singing that silly song?

The girl turned to face him. She seemed to be searching his face for something. Then she raised her hand to Luis' face, and with the gentle press of her thumb wiped away what remained of his tears. Her touch was cold and as light as sea-foam. Luis' body went rigid at her touch. He didn't know what to do. Then the sea girl saw Luis' wounded hand. She reached for it and examined it by the light of the moon.

"It's nothing, really," said Luis, trying to sound grown-up. "Just a cut."

The girl took a closer look at his hand. Then she bent to the side and scooped up some seawater from underneath the dock. The muscles in Luis' arm tensed. He tried to pull back his hand, but there was something about the strange girl that caused him to relax and yield. Instead, Luis just shut his eyes and turned the opposite direction. He could already imagine the sting of seawater biting into his wounded flesh. It would hurt, probably just as much as alcohol. He waited, but the pain never came. Luis opened one curious eye to see what was going on. His wounded hand dripped with seawater, except that there was no more wound. He ran his fingers



over where the cut had been, and it was like there had been no cut at all. Puzzled, Luis turned to the strange girl.

“Sea magic,” she said with a smile.

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There was a knock on the bedroom door. It was followed by a few more knocks in rapid succession. “Luis?” someone called. He was sure it was his mother. “Are you awake?”

Luis turned to his side. Boyz II Men was playing in his ears. His mother pushed open the door.

“What have you been doing?” she asked.

“Unpacking,” Luis mumbled.

“You call this unpacking?” his mother said, gesturing to the rumpled pile of clothes lying on the bed.

Luis sat up and removed his earphones. His mother picked up the clothes and tossed them into the cabinet. “I was going to do that,” Luis said.

“Why don’t you go downstairs and keep Ana company? She has nobody to talk to.”

Luis groaned.

His mother gave him a stern look. “We’ll be here for a week.”

“I know,” he said with a sigh.

“Don’t be difficult.”

Luis’ mother closed the door behind her as she made her way down the stairs. He could hear her footsteps descending into the living room. Luis buried his face into his pillow. It took a while before he was able to muster enough willpower to get out of bed and join everybody else downstairs.

Dinner was already being prepared. His dad and Mr. Del Mundo were barbecuing pieces of meat on the grill they had set up in the garden. Ana was setting the table, while her mother was in the kitchen, checking the rice cooker. As he passed the dinner table, Luis’ eyes accidentally met Ana’s. Out of politeness, he flashed her a half-smile. She did the same. He made his way to the sliding doors and stepped out into the garden

“You’re here,” came his dad’s voice. “Were you asleep?”

“No.”

“So where were you all this time? We’re almost done barbecuing. I thought you wanted to help us out.”

“I was just in my room,” Luis replied, “unpacking.”

“Well, now that you’re here,” his dad said handing him a plate of blackened pork chops, “take these inside.”

Luis did as he was told. He took the plate and set it down on the table. The rice was already there, and so were their drinks. His mother was coming in from the kitchen carrying a large bowl of potato salad. “Are the pork chops ready?” she asked.

Luis nodded.

“Good,” she said, setting the potato salad down. “Let’s start eating.”

Everybody assembled around the table to appreciate the spread of food—grilled pork chops, chicken casserole, potato salad, rice, and a nice bottle of wine. As his parents found their seats at the table, Luis felt like they were playing a round of musical chairs. As expected, the two remaining chairs were right next to each other. That was where he and Ana were supposed to sit. As he sat down, Luis moved his chair slightly to the left so as to maintain a bit of distance between Ana and himself. He managed to smile as he looked at his parents, all the while feeling that the entire trip was a trap designed to make him feel awkward.

The food was fine, but he couldn’t say the same about the conversation. It was dominated by jokes from his dad, which Luis didn’t find funny at all. Everybody else seemed to get the punch line, or at least pretended to do so. Sometimes, Luis would do the same just to humor everybody else. The good thing about having a talkative father was that Luis had an excuse for not talking to Ana.

Over the course of dinner, Luis mostly just played with the pork chop on his plate. Ana seemed to like the potato salad, although she ate like a bird. The grown-ups were enjoying themselves, and the wine looked like it was disappearing faster than the food. Soon, Mrs. Del Mundo opened another bottle of wine. Luis wasn’t paying close attention to the conversation, but it somehow went from politics, to a new kind of paper they were using in Japan, to an embarrassing moment in his dad’s childhood, to music, then to their favorite songs from the good old days. At nobody’s prodding, Luis’ mom suddenly announced: “Luis’ favorite song is ‘Kokomo.’ And he would like to sing it for you.”

Luis’ face turned red. He threw a sharp glance at his mother, who only laughed and took another sip of wine. Sure, it was his favorite song, but he wasn’t four years old anymore.

“I’m not feeling well,” Luis said. “And I already forgot the words.”

“Of course you haven’t,” his mother countered. She was smiling her cheeky smile. “How can you ever forget the words to *that* song?”

Between mouthfuls of food, Luis’ dad entered the conversation. “You’re just making excuses,” he teased. There was a piece of pork chop at the end of his fork. “You just don’t want us to hear that your voice is turning into the voice of a man!” His father said “man” in the way a gorilla would. Everybody laughed, except Luis. He suddenly felt the pressing need to sink deep into his chair and just disappear.

When the laughter subsided, more wine was passed around. Their dinnertime conversation then meandered into awkward puberty experiences. Luis was sure that he and Ana would be the center of attention—Puberty Exhibit A and Puberty Exhibit B, laid out in individual petri dishes to be poked and prodded at in the most uncomfortable ways. He didn’t want to endure any more awkwardness, so Luis excused himself from the table and said that he needed to use the bathroom. When he was out of sight, he opened the kitchen door and snuck out into the garden. He went out to the beach and headed for the old wooden dock.

Luis’ feet shoveled up the sand as he walked. He thought of the many nights he had spent alone on the beach. He wasn’t really alone though because he’d have his friend with him. He liked to sing whenever he was out on the dock, and the only song he could sing was “Kokomo.” Every time he sang that song, the sea girl would be there, sitting by his side. She listened to him as her pearl black eyes searched the horizon. Who would have thought that sea girls such as herself liked the music of the Beach Boys? It was funny that they never really talked to each other. He never got to know her name, and she never got to know his. He wasn’t even sure what manner of creature she was—siren, mermaid, fairy, or a cross between all three. But to Luis, it didn’t really matter. Nothing mattered as they sat together on the dock, lost in the darkness of the moonlit sea. On those nights, the whole world seemed suffused with the steady rhythm of the waves. Luis wasn’t sure though if the rhythmic beating had come from the waves or from somewhere within his chest.

When Luis reached the rocks, he avoided the aroma bush and stepped onto the wooden dock. It seemed a lot easier this time around. Luis thought that it was probably because he was taller now compared to just a year ago. He made his way to the very end of the dock where he sat and let his legs swing low over the sea. A feeling of calm settled over him. For the first time in the entire trip, Luis felt at ease. He gazed out into the horizon



and imagined the familiar scene of pirate ships, sea serpents, and desert islands with treasure chests and half-buried skeletons. He started singing “Kokomo,” because what other conversation could there be between him and sea? It started as a whisper, before rising in pitch and volume so as to compete with the rolling of the waves. Then something Luis had never expected happened. In the middle of the song, his voice cracked.

He chuckled upon realizing that his voice was indeed turning into the voice of a man. Luis sang once more, and this time the song came out as a series of broken notes like the croaking of a frog. He was amused at the strange sound his throat was producing and gave himself up to laughter. But where was his friend? He searched the sea and waited for her appear.

The water had risen, and his feet were submerged. He watched the tide rise to his ankles. The same tide rushed to the shore only to retreat in a gurgle of sea-foam. He watched the movement of the tide for a long time, long enough for his feet to get cold and for the skin on his toes to wrinkle. Still, there was no sign of her. Luis decided to sing again. He sang louder this time, hoping the breeze would carry his broken notes to wherever she was hiding. But the sea remained calm, and there was no sign of her anywhere.

The constellations had moved along their steady course in the night sky. Luis hoped that the sea girl would appear soon. He decided to wait a little longer, about ten minutes or so. But ten minutes dragged on into twenty, and twenty minutes dragged on to thirty. After a while, he stopped minding the minutes because he knew that she was not coming. He felt alone. It was just him and the sea.

Luis stood up and turned to leave. As he walked back the to the breakwater, the dock seemed longer than it had ever been before. It felt like quite a walk back to the shore. When Luis reached the rocks, he turned to look at the sea one more time. He felt that the sea had betrayed him. Then just as he was about to step down from the dock, his hand got caught in a stray branch of thorns. He cursed underneath his breath. The cut from the aroma bush was deep. He crouched at the edge of the dock and wrapped his wounded hand in the edge of his shirt. The pain was sharp. He felt like crying but not because of the cut. Luis felt another kind of pain as he sat alone at the edge of the dock. It was a dull kind of pain which he couldn't quite place.

Then he heard a rustling from somewhere in the bushes. “You should be careful out here,” came a voice. The voice was Ana’s.





Ana saw Luis' hand bundled in the edge of his shirt. She crouched beside him and unwrapped his wounded hand. She examined it by the light of the moon before taking her own handkerchief and binding the cut. A silence settled over them as his hand was cupped in hers.

Luis looked to the sea and saw that it was beautiful—as beautiful, dark, and vast as it has always been. Aside from the breeze that brushed against their faces, nothing else stirred. Luis thought of the Beach Boys and pirate ships. He thought of sea serpents and undersea kingdoms of coral castles and seaweed hills. Then he thought about 1997, and being twelve years old, and the rush of frightening and exciting things that made up a twelve year old's world.

The moon drifted overhead, turning the tops of the waves briefly silver. Luis turned to Ana and smiled. "I think we should head back."