LUCIA'S GRANDMOTHER:
Pages from the Journal of Dr. Harold J. Wright

September 16, 1914
Puerto Princesa, PI

The rain came down in bouts, crashing from the sky in impenetrable sheets. But it stopped often, allowing for a brief reprieve of sun. That was when the humidity set in. A fevered thickness rose from the soil of the jungle and coiled around one's body like a vise that grew tighter and tighter. Thankfully, it didn't take too long for the sky to darken again and unleash yet another downpour of rain.

By around dinnertime though, the sky looked like it was starting to clear. As I pulled aside the curtains of my window, I was surprised to get a clear view of the moon. It was a gibbous moon, just a few nights away from fullness. It floated like a ship over the nearby mountain peaks.

I'd like to think of tonight's moon as a simple reward for a task completed. When I placed the final period on the page, I was overcome by an immediate sense of calm. I stared at the page and knew, somehow, that my little project was finished.

September 27, 1914
Puerto Princesa, PI

There were four new malaria cases just this past week. Two of those afflicted were members of the constabulary, the third was a clerk from the treasury department, and the fourth was a member of the governor's household staff. These cases were in addition to the rather lengthy procession of patients who came to us complaining of diarrhea, both

mild and severe. I expected no less, given the recent rains, as well as the town's limited supply of potable water. This kept my tiny office quite busy for a good part of the entire week.

I also bumped into Eleanor this morning. As it turns out, we were both invited to the birthday celebration of one of the village chiefs. We sat under the shade of a mango tree with a handsome lunch spread out before us. As was our habit, Eleanor was first to go through her list of work-related travails. By this time, our travails had turned into laments. She said that the majority of her students didn't come to class for weeks because of the weather. When they returned, three full lessons needed to be repeated, because the new English words she had taught them seemed to have been washed away by the rains. One step forward, three steps back. Then it was my turn to tell her about the dismal state of affairs at the hospital—if one could even consider our sorry little hut as such.

When we were having our dessert of fruits, I told Eleanor that I had just finished the story. Upon hearing this, she pushed aside her plate and looked at me from across the table. Her brown eyes caught some of the sunlight that filtered through the branches of the mango tree. She smiled and asked if she could read it. Coyly, I said that a copy would appear on her desk sometime in the near future.

October 3, 1914
Puerto Princesa, PI

October is indeed here. It is the most dreadful of months on this island. The mosquitoes are everywhere, and they are relentless.

Our office is busy with six new cases of malaria, all of them children below the age of ten. We have an ample supply of quinine, but if the cases continue to rise, I will need to write Manila and request for a new batch to be delivered at the soonest possible time.

October 10, 1914
Puerto Princesa, PI

I saw Eleanor at the Municipal Hall earlier this afternoon. After our usual pleasantries, she reminded me of the story I had written. She said that she was still waiting for it to appear on top of her desk. Until then, I didn't know that she was serious about reading it.

It was nearing the end of the day, so I asked Eleanor if she had time to spare. I invited her for a walk, to which she agreed. We walked from the Municipal Hall down to the shore of the bay. The breeze from the sea was cool on our faces, and the smell of brine was crisp in the air. The sun had just begun to dip behind the mountains on the other side of the bay, turning the sky into a fiery shade of orange and gold.

As we walked along the shore, Eleanor paused to pick up a seashell here and there. She liked collecting all sorts of tiny bits and bobs. We traced the bay's long margin until the sky's orange hues purpled into dusk. I do not remember what it was that we talked about during our walk, but I do remember one thing. At some point, she very gently slipped her hand into the crook of my elbow and kept it there the entire time.

I offered to walk Eleanor home that evening. We parted ways at her doorstep with polite smiles. That night, there seemed to be a lot more stars in the sky.

October 15, 1914
Puerto Princesa, PI

I looked for a piece of ribbon in the general store, deluding myself that I could actually find such a trifling thing on this island. Sure enough, the store didn't have any ribbons, but they did have some rattan twine. Although not exactly a ribbon, I felt that it would suffice.

I purchased the twine and took it home. From my drawer, I retrieved the story and placed it on top of my desk. I bound the sheets of papers with the length of twine—first crosswise then lengthwise before knotting it into a bow. I held the sheaf of bound pages up before me and thought that it looked quite handsome. Now to muster enough courage to send it over to Eleanor. As they say, fortune favors the brave!

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October 15, 1914

Ms. Eleanor C. Parker
Puerto Princesa Elementary School
Puerto Princesa, PI

Dearest Eleanor,

Upon your insistence and encouragement, enclosed herewith is the story I have been telling you about. After much tossing and turning, I have decided to title it "Lucia's Grandmother." I have also included a brief introduction, which more or less explains the story's genesis and the reason for its title. I may not have the same eye for literature as you do, so I do hope you will look kindly on this piece. Truth be told, I have a feeling that you, out of all the people in this town, will find this occasional literary rambling of mine somehow likeable. Oh, what we do to keep ourselves sane on this island!

Yours truly,
Harry

Introduction

I have always been interested in the stories of this island. I have been interested in all sorts of stories ever since I was a boy. As I sailed from Manila to Puerto Princesa, my trunk contained all the medical tomes I needed for the dispensation of my duties, as well as the books I had while growing up—Rudyard Kipling, Herman Melville, Charles Dickens, and a tattered volume of Greek and Roman mythology. If my father had not prevailed upon me, I would have pursued a career in writing. I eventually entered the medical school at Columbia, which also happened to be my father's alma mater.

And now I find myself here, halfway around the world, in an island that looks very much like Kipling's dark and sweltering jungles. For little over a year now, I've waged a long and almost fruitless battle against malaria and a host of other tropical diseases. I am joined in this battle by my two associates—Greg, a newly graduated nurse from Manila, and Natividad, the local midwife.

There is a lot to do given the general state of public health and sanitation in the town. Ironically, much of my days are spent doing nothing at all. Majority of the natives of this island have a general mistrust of modern medicine. They do not seek out our services, so I end up ministering to a small group of people employed by the municipal government, all of whom happen to be transplants from Manila.

To pass the time, I have taken to writing in my journal. I have written about nonmedical things, such as the superstitions I would hear from the natives and their quaint fables about monkeys, wild pigs, hornbills, and crocodiles. But these entries have changed after a recent trip to the southern village of Aborlan, where Greg and I were asked to check the sanitation facilities of the new farming school.

We arrived in Aborlan early in the morning of July 14 and were scheduled to leave that same afternoon. But the rains started to pour by around midday, making the road back to Puerto Princesa muddy and unsuitable for travel. The weather showed no signs of improving, so Greg and I had no choice but to stay for the night.

It was a good thing that Greg had some relations in the seaside village. Although he had spent some time in Manila, his mother traces her roots to Brooke's Point, a town further down south. It was in the house of Greg's aunt, Mrs. Lucia Caabay, that we were able to find food and beds for that night. It was also from her that I learned of this most unusual story.

Mrs. Caabay narrated the story to Greg and myself after we had finished eating our dinner of fried fish. Our host appeared to be in her midsixties but was still quite sharp and had a sense of humor about her. She could manage some English, and whenever she faltered, Greg was quick to supply a translation. We were seated around the table, with a candle slowly diminishing as the rain outside weakened to a constant drizzle. What captivated me about this story was that it happened to Mrs. Caabay herself.

What follows is a narrative recounted from Mrs. Caabay's childhood. It took me a while to compose the story from the smattering of notes I had scribbled down that night. The writing of this story entailed some imagination on my part, for the purpose of both readability and a bit of aesthetics. The events in the story though are all from her account.

And so the story begins . . .

Lucia's Grandmother

They sat on the beach one night, many years ago—two women, a little girl and her grandmother. The girl was called Lucia, and her grandmother was called Juana. They sat on a buri mat not far from a coconut tree, which, due to nature's whimsy, had decided to grow sideways instead of straight up to the sky. It extended over the sand, a terrestrial creature drawn to the alien wonder that was the sea. On nights when the tide was high—as on the night this story begins—waves would lap back and forth underneath the crown of coconut leaves. It was the month when sea turtles returned to shore to lay their eggs. Lucia remembered that night well because it was her first time to see a falling star.

Lucia was eight years old at the time and had recently taken to counting everything that populated her world. She started with her outstretched fingers, and then her toes—ten fingers, ten toes. Then she moved on to the clay pots in their kitchen—four—the chickens underneath their hut—seven—and the fishing boats pulled up on the shore—eight. But the huts in their village bothered her. She had counted ten huts—as many as her fingers—and one more hut at the bend of the stream, which she didn't have a number for.

She also didn't have a number for all the coconut trees that stood on the shore, and for the flights of tiny black birds that drifted in and out of their leaves every afternoon. This frustrated Lucia to no end. But it was during the evenings when she was most frustrated. Whenever she looked up at the sky, a multitude of stars smiled down upon her, each one wanting to be counted.

"Is there a number after ten?" Lucia asked her grandmother as they sat on the shore that night. She had asked the question many times before and already knew her grandmother's answer.

"No such thing," the old woman replied.

Lucia frowned. She always frowned when she didn't like the answers given by grown-ups.

"Ten is already a big number," her grandmother continued. "Anything bigger than that will make your head hurt, and you won't be able to sleep at night."

The pair cast an odd silhouette against the backdrop of the sea. The old woman, stooped and corpulent, and her granddaughter, so slight that she could have been a bird.

Lucia laid back on the mat and looked up at the sky. The stars swirled all around her. The harder she looked, the more they seemed to increase.

Armed with her meager numbers, Lucia started counting them—one to ten—only to stop at ten and begin again at one.

Juana regarded her granddaughter with amusement. Lucia was different. She was different from all the other children in the village, and definitely different from any of her own.

Then a streak of silver cut across the sky. Lucia was startled. When she looked at her grandmother, Juana was quick to explain what it was.

"A falling star," the old woman said.

"Stars can fall?" asked Lucia.

Her grandmother nodded.

"Should I still count it after it has fallen?"

"But there are a lot more stars to count," Juana replied, gesturing to the tapestry of stars before them. And there was the moon, a silver smile among heaven's many jewels.

Lucia gave out an exasperated sigh. "Nay," she said, sounding very much like an adult, "are there more than ten stars out there?"

"A lot more," Juana replied.

"So what is the number after ten?" she pressed.

"Ay!" Juana exclaimed. "So many questions for somebody so small."

Lucia rolled her eyes. She wasn't sure if her grandmother saw it. Then she sat up on the mat and stared at the sea. The sea was dark, save for the sheen of silver that glistened on the back of the waves. "That star," Lucia said, "the one that fell from the sky—where did it fall to?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because the star could have hurt itself."

A smile spread across the old woman's face. She paused, taking some time to think of her answer. By this time, she was already an expert at answering her granddaughter's questions. "The star fell into the navel of the sea," she said.

Lucia had heard that phrase many times before. The old people in their village always said it—the navel of the sea, the beginning and end of all things—but she had no idea what it meant.

"And what if the star didn't fall into the sea? Tatay said that there are islands out there. Big ones with forests and mountains. What if the star fell on land?"

Juana knew her granddaughter had a curious mind—maybe too curious at times. As a newborn babe sleeping in her mother's arms, Juana knew that her granddaughter's mind was already wandering off. She

could tell from Lucia's unblinking eyes that her mind was elsewhere. It had grown feet and legs of its own and was jumping and dancing about in all the things yet to be experienced.

Juana looked into the distance as she tried to come up with a satisfactory answer to Lucia's question. She liked being challenged by such questions, for what else are grandmothers for than to be the source of stories? But there was a time when Juana would have felt very differently about this. Mothers and daughters loved in ways that were different from grandmothers and granddaughters. "When a star falls on land," Juana explained after a long pause, "it breaks into tiny pieces—far too many for anybody to count."

A breeze blew in from the cliffs behind them. It tickled the back of Lucia's ear before circling about her and dancing off into the sea.

"Have you ever seen a star fall on land?" Lucia asked.

"Oh, yes!" her grandmother replied, eager to please her young listener. "That was a long time ago. A star fell on the beach—right here."

"What did it look like?"

The old woman closed her eyes. For a moment, she heard nothing but the waves. "It looked like a man," she said. "A handsome man. He had long hair, dark skin, and a wicked smile."

"Did the star look like Tatay?"

"Oh no, not at all!" Juana dismissed, waving a hand in the air. "The star was much taller than Tatay. And he didn't wake the entire village whenever he sneezed."

Lucia laughed. Juana laughed, too. For a moment, they were two friends giggling under the coconut trees on a starry night.

"And the star had a scar above its eye," Juana continued, tracing a line that cut across her eyebrow at a sharp angle. "You see, this star was a brave warrior, and he had fought many battles."

"Did he fight against other stars?"

The old woman shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know what happened up there in the sky, but I do remember what happened down here. He stood right there," Juana said, pointing at some undefined spot the beach. "He took just a few steps on the sand, then he broke into tiny pieces!"

Lucia looked at her feet. She sunk her toes into the sand. A small crab skirted about her toes before disappearing into a hole nearby. "And did you make friends with the star?" she asked.

The question took Juana by surprise. She regarded her granddaughter with loving, almost frightened eyes. "Yes," the old woman said, both to

her granddaughter and to herself, "I did. I talked to him. I said hello. And we spoke." Her voice was on the verge of trembling. "I still talk to him sometimes. Up to this very day."

"But how? You said that he broke into tiny pieces."

"I'll show you a secret." The old woman bent over and took a fistful sand. She raised her hand to the moon and let the sand slip through her fingers. Tiny flecks sparkled in the moonlight. They sparkled like stars. "There he is," Juana said with a smile. "The bones of the star. He still shines as brightly as he did on the night he came down from the sky."

Lucia observed the cascade of sand. She tried to catch it by positioning her cupped hands underneath her grandmother's. But as soon as the sand gathered in her palms, it slipped through her fingers and the stars disappeared.

"What do you and the star talk about?" the girl asked.

"Nothing," her grandmother replied, suddenly aware of the silliness of their conversation. She dusted her hands. Juana knew that on starry nights like this, the very old could just be as silly as the very young.

The waves rolled up onto the shore, lapping back and forth in a flurry of sea-foam. It was only in her old age that Juana began to notice the brief pause between the rushing and retreating tide. In that silence, the entire universe was rendered still. The old woman knew these silences well. There were nights when she wanted nothing more than to disappear into them, a formless spirit lost in between the exhalations of the sea. The old woman closed her eyes. She waited as she felt the rhythm of the tide—rolling in, rolling out, until finally, the silence came. It washed over the shore, over the coconut grove, over the huts of their village, then it broke over the jungle-clad cliffs, the mountains, the entire island, rushing to the unknown worlds beyond. But there was something different about this silence. In that moment when the world was at its most quiet, Juana heard a name. It was nothing but a whisper on the night breeze. It was a name she had not been called in a very long time. The name caused a sudden shiver in Juana's heart.

"Maybe it's time for us to go," the old woman announced. "Your Mama will be looking for you."

Juana rose to her feet with much effort. She picked up the mat and shook it clean of sand. She folded it into a square and handed it to her granddaughter for her to carry. Lucia took the mat and danced a swirling path through the coconut grove. She skipped as she went along, always pausing to make sure her grandmother wasn't too far behind.

On most nights, Lucia slept in the hut of her grandparents. This night though, she would be sleeping with her father and mother, whose hut was just a short walk away. When the little girl reached her parent's hut, she stood by its bamboo steps, waiting for her grandmother to give her permission to enter. Juana gestured for Lucia to go inside, and the little girl clambered up the steps like a nimble monkey.

Juana hobbled the rest of the way. Her back was stooped from the many years spent in the shade of their hut, bent over the fishing nets she would make for her husband. He and the other men would take the nets on their fishing boats as they ventured out into the sea.

A few weeks back, Juana had noticed a dull pain in her left foot. Whenever she walked, the pain grew sharper. Her foot had started to swell, but Juana made no issue of it, in the same way she made no issue of the other unspoken pains in her life. If the pain persisted, she would need to walk with the aid of a stick.

When Juana reached their hut, she readied herself to ascend the three bamboo steps that led up to their door. As she placed her foot on the first slat of bamboo, she turned to look at the sea one more time. A cool breeze blew in from the water and washed over her face. She gazed into the horizon, beyond the horizon, then into the navel of the sea, where if one had learned to see with the eyes of the heart, the beginning and end of all things could be made visible. Then there it was again. A whisper. A name. But it was a different name this time. It was a name she had known her entire life, but one she had never allowed herself to say. It crept into her consciousness with the urgency of waves rushing up the shore. She had said that name before, just once, on a long-ago night when a star stood before her on the beach. How she longed to say that name again.

But she wouldn't say it tonight. Not tonight. Because tonight, Juana was a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. She had a husband, a married daughter, a son, and a granddaughter, all of whom she loved in the precise way that each of them needed her love. For her husband Manuel, she had a love that was present and steady. No longer passionate, her love for him was now rendered polite by the loving and hurtful things both had said and unsaid over the course of many years. For her daughter Elena, Juana reserved a love that was companionable. Her daughter was a woman now, married to a man who raised chickens and slept too much. As a grown woman, her daughter was now aware of the confusing set of rules that all women must live by. For her son Manuelito, she had love for a child who

was forever tugging at the hem of his mother's skirt. She doted on him, even now that he was at the cusp of manhood, going about being a wicked youth to all the young girls of the village. And for her granddaughter Lucia, Juana saved a strange kind of love. She saw power in the girl's questioning eyes and dancing mind. It was a power that had always beguiled Juana.

Shifting her weight on her good foot, Juana walked up the bamboo steps. As she entered their hut, she saw her husband sleeping on the mat by the window while her son slept in the far corner. She stepped inside, leaving the starry night behind.

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The men of the village would set out to sea just before the first rays of sun speared the horizon. Juana would stir from sleep as soon as her husband woke and readied himself for his day at sea. He would wake Manuelito, who would follow his father out onto the beach. As was her habit, Juana would wrap a blanket about her shoulders and walk father and son down to the sea. The men would drag their fishing boat into the tide until it was deep enough for the waves to carry it. She would watch them from the shore, arms folded across her chest. She would pray to the Virgin, beseeching her for safe passage over the waves. Then the tiny fishing boat would push off, to return by midday with its nets heavy with fish. If they were lucky, Manuelito would return with a fistful of pearls, pried from the mouths of deep-sea clams.

That morning, Juana stood unmoving on the shore, watching the fishing boat sail off as it carried the men of her life. Her husband, Manuel, was a good sailor, but he was really a man of the forest. Unlike the other men in their village who learned to swim as soon as they could walk, Manuel's first time at sea was when he was already a young man. The sea was not in his veins, and his knowledge of the sea was learned from the fishermen of old. Manuel and his parents had moved down from the cliffs at the edge of the village after the forest started refusing to yield its blessings. He was a different person back then—a charming, wiry youth who threw pebbles at Juana's hut to attract her attention. At first, Juana considered this an annoying disturbance, and then she began to look forward to it. There even came a time when her face would flush upon hearing that familiar sound—one tap on their sawali wall, then another, then another. It was always three pebbles, and she would know that it was

Manuel. Back then, Juana was a different person, too.

And now there was Manuelito. Unlike his father, the boy was truly a child of the sea. He was sure of the sea's temperament as he was sure of his own. He knew how to coax the sea's bounty from its depths. All the fishermen were in agreement that Manuelito was the best diver in their village. He knew where the best fish were hiding and could dive for pearls in depths where others would not dare go. He brought his mother much happiness, perhaps because he looked so much like a younger version of his father. As father and son stood side by side, Juana could not help but wonder where her Manuel, the boy who threw pebbles at her hut, had disappeared to. In his place stood a gruff man, large and unsmiling, each day growing more and more tired from the weight of the years piling on his shoulders.

When Manuel's boat was but a dark smudge on the waves, Juana left the shore to return to their hut. She would cook their food, weave their nets, and wait for her husband's return, as she had done for many years.

But it was already past noon, and there was still no sign of her husband. The other fishermen had already come home, and none of them had seen Manuel's boat. This worried Juana. In truth, her worry had started earlier that day as she saw her husband and son off on the beach. The sea was calm, but there seemed to be an evil wind about. It blew down the shore early that morning. The wind crept into her bones despite the blanket that was wrapped around her shoulders. She knew that the evil wind was there, but she said nothing.

It was already close to dusk when the other fishermen spotted Manuel's boat in the distance. Juana rushed to the shore. She was still unable to shake the morning's unsettling chill. When her husband's boat reached the shallows, Juana saw that they had no fish.

"Moros," Manuel said.

The word sent a chill down Juana's back. It was a chill that was colder than the morning's evil wind.

"They took our catch," he continued, picking up his fishing net and flinging it onto the shore. The net was in tatters.

Juana snatched her husband's arm and steadied him. She searched his eyes. They had anger in them, but they also had shame. He eventually looked away. She let go of him and went to meet her son. Manuelito was angry, too, but she knew that the anger was just a mask that the boy had put on. She knew that her son was just relieved to be back home.

As soon as the fishing boat was secure on the shore, Manuel marched off into the village to search for their chief. But their chief was younger than he was. He had no memory of the slave raids of the past. This chief believed in trading with the new town up the river. He believed in the stone fortress built by the Spaniards, their church, and the pale god on the cross. He didn't know of the Moro prince Usman who in one raid took fifteen young women and twelve young men to be sold as slaves to the sultan who ruled the islands south of Balabac. He didn't know about Usman's younger brother, the mad one, who made playthings of their captives. For sport, he slaughtered them in the water so he could enjoy the sight of the tide bubbling red with blood. There were many things that this new chief didn't know of, but which the older villagers remembered all too well—the cold sensation of a kris against the skin of one's throat, the sight of a trim fleet of caracoas breaking the horizon, the terror that crept underneath one's skin at the sound of battle gongs echoing in the distance. When Manuel marched off to meet their chief, Juana knew that nothing would come of it. The world had changed since the days of Usman. It had changed so much that slave raids of the past were now relegated to stories passed around by formerly young and courageous warriors as they eased themselves into their new roles as the village's band of boisterous old men.

Over the next few days, there was a lot of talk about the Moros. Some of the fishermen were cautious about sailing out to sea. There was talk of a slave raid happening before the next full moon. But it was all just talk and remained as such. When the uncertainty died down, the men rode their fishing boats out to sea once again.

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"What's a Moro?" Lucia asked as she crouched in the shade of her grandparents' hut.

"Don't bother Nanay," Elena whispered as she shot a sideways glance at her daughter. She had hoped that her mother didn't hear Lucia's question.

But the old woman heard her granddaughter. "Moros are men from the south." Juana explained, her hands continuing their swift, repetitive movement of stringing together the twines of a fishing net. "They are pirates," she added, looking up at her daughter.

Elena looked down at the net that she was mending. It was her father's net, the one that had been torn.

"Are the Moros bad people?" Lucia asked. "Tatay told me that they took his catch."

"Lucia," Elena cautioned. But the girl was undeterred. She was asking her grandmother after all, not her mother. The two women sat across each other with the net spread out in between them like a black sea.

"Do you think they are bad people?" Juana replied.

The question hung in the air, begging for an answer. It surprised Elena, but it surprised Juana even more.

"All this talk of Moros," Elena said after a while. "They will not come here. Even if they do, our men are strong and will drive them back into the sea."

Lucia frowned. Her grandmother knew that the child would not let the question go unanswered. Her mind had started to dance once again.

"I heard that the Moros are giants, and that they dress in gold, and that they have tiny horns on their head like goats."

"Who told you that?" Elena asked, appearing both shocked and amused.

But the girl didn't answer. "They also don't believe in Jesus and the Virgin. They have their own god who is dark and bearded."

"That's enough, Lucia," her mother said.

Juana looked on at the familiar scene of a mother trying to contain her daughter's dancing mind. She must have taught Elena well. After Lucia was born, Juana started to notice a change in her daughter. It was a change that was brought about by motherhood no doubt, but one that was also caused by her own hand. Elena had grown into a firm woman. Juana was pleased with the way she had raised her daughter, because wasn't this what she had wanted all this time?

Juana was lost in her thoughts. Then she heard Elena raise her voice. The old woman looked up from the fishing net and saw Lucia. The child had an angry frown on her face. Then just as children do, her granddaughter got up and ran off, leaving her mother no other recourse but to give out an exasperated sigh.

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When Manuel set out to sea again, Juana stood on the beach as she had done many times before. This time though, Juana had Lucia by her side.

The little girl had spent the night in her grandparents' hut and was in a foul mood when she was roused from her sleep at such an early hour. The scene was familiar one. Juana remembered waking her own daughter in this same way, many years ago.

Juana instructed Lucia to stand still and watch the fishing boat disappear into the horizon. This was the way it has always been. Juana recalled that morning several years ago when Elena had stormed out on her. With angry hands, her daughter gestured at the empty beach on either side of them. None of the other women from their village were there to send their husbands off to sea. For young Elena, this was not the way it had always been but simply the way of the old. Still, Juana insisted that her daughter come down to the beach every morning. She insisted with a firm, unwavering determination, that now it was her granddaughter who stood in her daughter's place.

There was a lesson that Juana wanted to teach Lucia that morning. She had wanted to teach the same lesson to Elena, many years ago. But as she stood on the beach, the years having chipped away at all old things like waves smoothing the sharp faces of seaside cliffs, Juana found herself unsure of the lesson and its importance.

A chill breeze blew down the beach and wrapped its fingers around Juana's body. It was the same evil wind that she had felt on the morning Manuel's catch was taken from him. As they walked back to their hut, Juana removed her blanket and wrapped it around her granddaughter's shoulders. The evil wind coiled around them. Somehow, Juana welcomed its embrace.

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When the waves started to rise, everybody knew that a storm was coming. The fish were still plentiful in the shallows, but the fishermen said that the squids in the darker depths were beginning to hide.

One night, Lucia was stirred from her sleep by a strange sound. It was a deep and metallic beat. She thought that she might have been dreaming, but as she opened her eyes, the sound remained.

Lucia's eyes adjusted to the darkness of her grandparents' hut. As she searched her surroundings, her gaze fell on the mat by the window. Something was not right. The familiar shape of her grandmother's body was nowhere to be seen. Through the opening of the door, a silver shaft of light

pierced the darkness of the hut. The light was coming from outside. Lucia pushed aside her blanket. She knew where her grandmother had gone to.

The metallic beat was mesmerizing. It drew Lucia to the beach. As she made her way through the coconut grove, the young girl saw a familiar silhouette in the distance. There, at the edge of the waves, stood her grandmother, a stooped figure glowing white in the light of the moon. Lucia ran to her, but just as she came to the bent coconut tree, she was stopped in her tracks by a sight she had never seen before.

A handsome boat rode high on the crests of the waves. It was a gleaming vessel, shining silver against the darkness of the sea. The boat had outriggers that spread out like great wings over the water. It had a graceful prow that coiled up like the neck of a heron, and on the prow was the sculpted head of a serpent. The ship had a great sail that rippled silver in the wind.

Lucia's grandmother was standing in the shallows, her hand extending out to the ship, as if calling to a majestic creature from the depths of the sea. The ship rode the tide with ease, drawing closer and closer to the shore. When it reached the shallows, Lucia saw a figure emerge onto the prow of the vessel. It was a lone sailor, a tall man with long, black hair and a sword at his waist.

Juana stepped into the tide and stumbled as she waded in. This was a familiar sight for her—the sleek caracoa that brought fear to their shores many years ago, the battle gongs that filled the air with the song of war, and the man on the ship—the prince with his kris and a scar across his eyebrow. It was he who had called Juana by her name—her true name—on a long-ago night when she was as young and beautiful as he. She had heard that name again on the evil wind that wrapped itself around her body like a lover's embrace. He had whispered it to her many times over, calling her to come back to herself.

But she had refused him on that long-ago night, out of fear maybe, or out of a sense of duty to her people. She sent him back to the sea, a spurned prince on a doomed ship, whose death at the hands of the Spaniards their village would celebrate with feasting. She called his name that night while the entire village was in revelry. She called it out on the lonely shore by the bent coconut tree as her tears dissolved into the sand. She prayed in her ancient language, that language before the language of the pale god on the cross. She prayed that he would one day return to her. She prayed to the stars.

And here he was now. And here she was. But how cruel fate has been, because she was now old—a stooped woman at the end of her time, a grandmother with a heart that was tired from the task of loving others her entire life, but gratefully worn from the amount of love it had received. How could she join him now?

Lucia cried out to her grandmother from the coconut grove. The man on the ship frightened her. But more than being frightened, Lucia was worried. She knew what was going on.

Juana turned and saw Lucia by the shore. She also saw her world—the fishing boats moored beyond the reach of the tide, the coconut trees that have accompanied her all her life, and the familiar outline of their hut. She saw the other huts as well, and all the people who passed in and out of them throughout the years. There were the cliffs, too, and the jungle that crept over them, stretching farther and farther away from the sea. Then she was drawn back to the sight of her granddaughter, waving her arms by the bent coconut tree. She remembered the day Lucia was born, and that night Lucia had attempted to count all the stars in the sky. She remembered that early hour before dawn when she and Lucia had watched her husband's fishing boat sail out to sea. Juana was supposed to teach her granddaughter a lesson that morning. Now, she was once again certain of that lesson's importance. But in order to teach that lesson, she needed to break her granddaughter's heart.

Juana raised a hand and waved it in Lucia's direction. She wasn't sure if her granddaughter could see her, but something in her heart told her that she did. Then the old woman turned and walked into the sea. She wobbled in the water, the tide buffeting her body as her pained foot struggled to find its balance on the shifting sand. She reached her hand out to her prince, who regarded her with the same unchanged eyes from long ago. She smiled at him as he helped her climb aboard the silver ship.

Then the oars were raised. The sail filled with wind, and the handsome vessel began its eastward journey over the tide. The sea grew violent as the ship sailed off. The vessel rose and fell as it cut through the white-crested waves. Then in that silent moment between the inhaling and exhaling tide, the silver vessel slipped into the sea like a quiet dream. A spray of sea-foam lingered in the air, and then there was nothing.

In that brief moment of silence, Juana could have heard the cries of a little girl on the beach, but she didn't.

*

They said that Juana had drowned in the sea that night. They blamed it on the storm that rolled in the following day. It took some time before Lucia could make sense of what had happened to her grandmother. She didn't speak for several days after that. All day long, she would sit by the bent coconut tree, gazing out into the distance as she listened to the silences in between the waves. Come nighttime, she would seek refuge in the quiet company of stars.

A funeral was held on the beach after a few weeks. During the ceremony, everyone asked Lucia questions. They would ask her the same questions long after that. The girl knew the answer to all these questions, but she preferred to keep quiet. It was only after a year or so, on the same month when sea turtles returned to the shore to lay their eggs, that Lucia finally answered those questions. Whenever she was asked about her grandmother, Lucia would reply with a kind of certainty beyond her years. "She sailed off into the navel of the sea, the beginning and end of all things," Lucia would say. "But she was not alone."

*

May 17, 1925

AVH Hartendorp
Editor-in-Chief
Philippine Magazine
Manila, PI

Dear Mr. Hartendorp,

My name is Eleanor C. Parker, a schoolteacher recently returned from the island of Palawan, where I taught English in Puerto Princesa Elementary School for little over ten years. My initial assignment was only intended to be for three years but was extended repeatedly, also upon my own requests. Many consider the island of Palawan a hardship post. In a sense, it truly is. However, for reasons both logical and illogical, I fell in love with the island, its people, and, of course, my students. But life has

other things in store for me, and within the next two months, I shall be boarding a steam ship for the long journey back home.

Before I leave the Philippines for good, I would like to share with you a story written by a friend of mine from my days in Puerto Princesa. Dr. Harold J. Wright served as a doctor in the island when the hospital was nothing more than a ramshackle hut. He was one of the first American doctors sent to Palawan, back in the early days of Puerto Princesa. He braved all its hardships and contributed invaluably to the island's progress. But after about five years into his service, Dr. Wright fell victim to malaria, the same disease he so valiantly fought against.

I do not wish to go into all of Harry's achievements, but I would like you to know that Harry was a man of many gifts. If his life had taken a different course, he would have been a writer. I knew Harry as both a doctor and a friend, and I can say that he was a truly a man of letters.

The attached story was given to me in October of 1914. It has never seen publication before, since I kept the only copy inside my desk drawer, along with my dusty collection of seashells, yellowed notes, and brown pieces of string—bits and bobs, really, but precious keepsakes nonetheless. I am certain that including this story in the *Philippine Magazine* will honor the memory of Harry—little known as it may be—as well as the memory of the people he worked with, the people he served, the people he loved, and those who loved him back.

If you so deem the story suitable for publication, I would like to request that a copy be reserved for one of Harry's longtime associates, Mr. Gregorio Rodriguez, who is now the head of the municipal health office in Puerto Princesa. If you would be so kind, I would like for a copy to be mailed to Mr. Rodriguez. This story is his, as much as it is Harry's.

As for me, please do not go through the trouble of sending me a copy in the US. I have read this story many times before. It has accompanied me through those long, solitary nights, like a gentle companion waiting by my bedside, keeping watch over me as I drifted off to sleep. Needless to say, I already know the ending.

Sincerely,
Eleanor C. Parker