

LAST RESORT

Glenn Diaz

THERE IS ALWAYS THE FETAL POSITION, NO MATTER HOW OLD you get and no matter how far you try to escape. My hands, thick and sad, can always cradle my knees, and I can return to this original position - primal position! - and it hardly matters if it's in the dark, watery womb or this strange room, this uneasy stillness of a morning 48 years since that first bloody burst.

Next door, the music croons, garbled and distant, like it came from a phonograph or a rusty jukebox: "Just when I'd stopped, opening doors." Horrible speakers, I thought, and the birds are chirping.

My eyes are moist when I open them, so I blink and blink. I get up and stretch out my arms. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, then blink some more, hoping the rogue tears would stop. From the bed, the light that blankets this room is a calm vermillion, the curtains muting the otherwise harsh sunlight. The sound of rolling water bounces around the walls.

I clear my throat and call out to the bare back busy in the small room's even smaller kitchen, "Hey." My voice, it is deep and unfeminine, but I have grown to love its severe monotone. My legs are splayed like pretzel, the right indistinguishable from the left, like islands in the sea of ruffled bedspread.

"Good morning Ma'am Carolina. I have already bought -," I narrow my eyes at him. "Good morning, Carolina. I have already bought the cigarettes and beer." He enunciates each word carefully, mustering the same formality of two weeks ago, when we met.

“What about the -”

“The pills are on the drawer.”

I feel an urge to crawl under the covers, now a tumbled mess dripping to the floor. If I look closely, I can trace Reynaldo’s profile in the bed. The dent in the pillow. The blanket he broke free from. The minutest leveling that cradled his back. The music next door continues, “There ought to be clowns.” Birds still chirped in this place?

THE ROOM IS FINE AND CLEAN. IT IS NOT SO BAD. THE TWO SINGLE BEDS, pushed together, are modest and modestly soft, with flowery covers predominantly orange and red. The bed spread is coarse against a naked torso, and coarser still when you sweep your feet slowly against it, expecting smoothness. There is a little side table with a cardboard desk calendar advertising the wrong month. There are curtains, thick and rigid, refusing to sway in the sparse wind blowing in the tropical summer. There is a kitchen, a gas stove, a tiny pot. It is not so bad.

Arriving during the peak season, we settled for what they called “home stay.” You stay with a local family in one of their spare rooms. In our case, it was a separate house built recently for this anticipated crowd. The faint smell of cement hung in the air, and the sloppy paint job in the walls was barely dry. There are two rooms that open up to a small veranda in front.

It is not five-star, but it’s OK. The beach is just a five-minute walk away, and the barest of necessities - no water heater, no carpets, no kitchen with granite counters - remind me of its transience, that it is a place where people come and go, that it is not home.

The other room is occupied by three tourists who came yesterday afternoon. With their big bags, short shorts, and silly excitement over the beach, Reynaldo assumed they were from Manila. They’re a curious bunch, students, probably, and the first time they saw me, sitting in my chair with a bottle of San Miguel in hand, one audibly whispered “colonizer” and they laughed, like it’s an inside joke.

“You *are* a colonizer,” said Reynaldo, looking up from the laptop.

“Yes, brown man. You should thank me for civilizing your kind, you know.”

He smiled with a naughty glint in his eyes, “C’mon, colonizer. Pillage my mountains and seas.”

My shoulders shook in laughter.

During dinner later that day, the banter of the tourists was non-stop. In between pinching the huge grilled fish, dipping it in a concoction of fermented fish, onions and tomatoes, and stuffing it in my mouth, I could make out parts of their conversation via the few individual words I could understand: wind turbines, 20 stories, *puta*, enough money, hitch a ride; then Ayn Rand, objectivism, *siempre*, harsh, humanist bullshit; and then professional, laptop, boytoy, *puede*, Vanessa Redgrave, early 50s, forlorn -.

They were talking about us.

“DON’T YOU LOVE FARCE,” BARBRA STREISAND IS ASKING, WHEN I OPEN my eyes.

I roll over lethargically.

“You dozed off again,” Reynaldo, now lying opposite me on the bed, whispers when our eyes meet. “Did I tire you out last night?”

He goes for my mouth but catches my left cheek.

“Reynaldo, please.”

I stumble out of bed to the red cooler by the door before glancing back. On the bedside table, the cup of coffee, I can tell, has gone cold. Reynaldo looks on forlornly, his body hunched like half a heart.

I fish out a bottle of beer and make my way outside. I settle in my chair and wonder sheepishly if Reynaldo’s the kind of guy, romantic and brooding, who ponders on the space left on a bed, like me, like Damian, when he’s not running off with a needy, leggy grad student. The sound of running water resumes, and I regret knowing the answer.

Several minutes later, the tourists emerge from next door, garbed in swimwear, cameras slung around their necks. Looking at them now, two appear to be a couple; the third probably a close friend of one or both. They descend the stone steps from the veranda, cross the patch of uneven grass, and begin their leisurely stroll to the beach.

The three start off walking together in one line, until the third wheel, a guy, stops to make way for a passing SUV. He willingly drifts a meter or two behind and stays there. Oblivious, the couple is holding hands, dragging their feet in unison, while the third wheel kicks pebbles on the ground. They make a right turn by the row of idle tricycles, before fading into the endless row of palm trees that lined the road, en route to the nearest resort.

Get used to it, I mumble. A strange smile erupts in my face, as I take another swig of beer. You can only spot sadness in other people when

you get by, when your own isn't as oppressive and distracting. Pockets of happiness.

I tighten my grip on the bottle, simultaneously cupping the pleasant coldness in my palms and basking in the warmth of the sun on my arms and legs. I take another mouthful, relish it, savor its bitter sweetness, before merrily swallowing. My vision begins to blur and the world starts to spin, but that's what happens when you ingest beer in an empty stomach.

A puff of smoke. The roar of a passing car. A girl getting water from the pump. It is my first vacation in years.

"TIENE LOS OJOS MAS TRISTES," I SAY SOFTLY TO MYSELF. STILL SLUMPED IN my chair, I tug at my skirt and the hem obeys, more legs for the sun to punish in earnest. The tourists have returned.

The guy with the sad eyes appears to be the funniest one among them, an irony that is so familiar. Almost every word he says is punctuated with laughter, like a joke he tells about French cows and how they moo. He delivers the punch line, raising an eyebrow, curling his lips, fixing a phantom beret. His next victim is the local dialect and its penchant for hard, exaggerated r's. To cite, there's the expression for heavy traffic. Why, it's a lesbian preoccupation, he realizes belatedly, to their additional delight. "Bumperrr to bumperrr," the stranger repeats for my benefit it seems.

Absolutely entertained, I feel vindicated. What's not to like about this lovely country?

NO ONE WOULD TAKE THE PHILIPPINES TWO WEEKS AGO. THE NEW HEAD OF oncology, pirated and ready to impress, wanted to send all executives abroad to "master with native fervor" every country in his jurisdiction. The news got everyone giddy. A free trip. Most wanted to go to Japan or New Zealand or Vietnam. The Philippines, I learned, was associated with mountains of garbage and people losing their heads, mail-order brides and household help. One thought it was somewhere in Central America; another, a US territory, like Saipan, only poorer.

I felt a little defensive, because my father had been to Manila and Boracay and had nothing but good things to say about them and Filipinos. I grew up in Sevilla, and the Philippines was a staple in Spanish history books, at least a page or two: under Spanish rule for over 300 years, outrageously

Catholic, and millions of Reyeses and Cruzes - kings and crosses - last names that betray the ancient link. Asia's Mexico.

So as my colleagues openly scrambled to get the "best" countries - South Korea for cheap plasma sets, Thailand for Phuket, and India to visit relatives - I sent an email to my new boss. I mentioned in passing my long, impeccable performance in the company, save for an episode five years ago, and said that my Filipino cook has a cousin with research experience who could help me. "A tour guide and an assistant in one," I closed, satisfied. "We don't have to fly in my assistant, in the process saving us some overhead."

There was no affirmative response to my email, but in the meeting the following day where he announced our destinations, in the big hall with the orange draperies that watch over everyone, the new oncology head said, in between quips about Manny Pacquiao and Imelda Marcos' shoes, that I'd be traveling 3,884 miles to the Philippines, and who'd want mangoes?

There was an awkward pause, and I grinned nervously, mentally egging him to move on to the next country already. Everyone avoided my eye amid the soft rustling of whispers, the spattering of unsure applause. In the sendoff dinner the following week, I was eating something - a piece of quiche? A slice of quesadilla? - when it came to me in silent montage, all my 20 years or so in this company. The routines. The familiar places. The small talks.

"Hewitt in the Aussie Open finals, how about that?"

"Big rugby match tonight!"

"Ha-ha did Mindy really get arrested for DUI in Chatswood?"

I was never popular, but it all went further downhill after the divorce was finalized five years ago: two tumultuous weeks, I was to learn later, when people furtively hid scissors and staplers when I come close, when they felt sorry for me but not sorry enough to ask.

"What if I didn't return?" I idly asked my assistant Mindy back at my office after the assembly. "And what are you going to do there?" she said. "Give massages by the beach?" before taking a bite on her morning bagel.

REYNALDO WASN'T QUITE HOW I PICTURED HIM DURING THE EIGHT-HOUR flight. When my cook bragged about her cousin's credentials, I imagined a lanky guy in his twenties, wearing clear specs and neat, layered clothes. But the man holding out the manila folder with my name was anything but a nerd: he was dark, muscular, and slightly taller than my five-foot-seven-inch

frame. The first time I saw him, he was in a white polo that hugged his torso, his biceps slightly peeking, sparse sweat dotting his chest.

While there was no parting of the crowd in that sweltering Manila airport, my head still swirled with fantasies of romance in the tropics. This would do, I told myself. *He* would do.

"Hi," I said, trying to suppress this alarming and forbidden giddiness. "Reynaldo?"

"Yes. Ma'am Carolina?"

"Please," I extended my hand and smiled coolly. "Call me Carolina."

"OK, Carolina. Let's go?"

On the way to the hotel, the humidity inside the rented van was so that I imagined its smooth roof glistening smokily to the afternoon sun. He was 28, he said, a history major from a state university in Ilocos Norte, a province north of Manila. He lives with his parents and works for the governor's office. He took a two-week leave for this project.

Outside, kids in rags bearing flower garlands for sale ran around accosting idle cars in intersections. Men peddled strange stuff, from bubble machines to feather dusters. Jeeps in varying degrees of neglect trudged on, like sardine cans grilling its helpless contents. Inside, the air-conditioning unit worked full blast, to little avail. I casually nudged Reynaldo, careful not to scorn the weather or anything in his country, "Global warming huh?" before wiping my forehead with my hanky. He just nodded and smiled. His eyes are brown, like sharp almond-shaped orbs under bushy eyebrows that have clearly never met a pair of tweezers.

Sweating profusely, I started unbuttoning my shirt. He quickly looked the other way, but the tint of the van reflected his ill-disguised curiosity: the twin orbs seeking to take a peek at my drenched collar bones unraveling.

THE NEXT FIVE DAYS WENT BY IN A DAZE, PACKED AS THEY ARE, MEETING after meeting, and endlessly looking forward to my hotel room and a glass of wine. Reynaldo tagged along, copying files, recording interviews, and keeping me entertained while shuffling between venues. In the end, there was nothing left to do except compile all data and write the report. At the celebratory dinner for two, we were talking about something - his mother's bout with colon cancer? My ex-husband who taught literature at a community college? - when Reynaldo floated the idea of preparing the final output in Pagudpud, his province's answer to Boracay.

"I'll make that trip anyway and you said you wanted to go to the beach. What do you think?" he asked, his eyes like a child's. My chest thumped, in trepidation or excitement or both, sometimes I could no longer distinguish. The following day at dusk, we were boarding a pink north-bound bus, bracing ourselves for a 12-hour ride.

TO CLAIM PROVIDENCE, I PLANNED TO SAY IN THE FUTURE THAT I *REALLY* GOT to know Reynaldo in a Philippine province called La Union - the union. "How foreboding right," I would say to the few who'd care to listen, trying to approximate the same wide eyes when I say it each time.

The trip stretched on as night sunk deeper, and we were both up, somehow, amid the dim lights, the low murmur of the air-conditioning, and the occasional snoring from some passengers. Outside, it was dark, one sleepy town after another, and it would be another five hours until the sun would rise.

"Mind if I asked you something in Spanish?" Reynaldo said, out of nowhere, when I put my paperback down.

I shrugged, "Sure."

"Ti-e-nes ham-bre?" he labored.

"Hambre," I said, not pronouncing the H. "No, no tengo hambre. Pero gracias, Reynaldo. A mi, me gusta un dried mango."

He fished out a bag of dried mangoes from our stash.

"I wanted to practice my Spanish," he said. "I bought a phrasebook."

"Nice. What else can you say?"

He paused, as if thinking, then said, "Hay una farmacia cerca?"

I laughed, then proceeded rapidly, "No creo que hay una farmacia o hospital cerca. Estamos en un autobus. Por que? Esta infirmado, Reynaldo? No esta bien?"

The next two hours, we spent catching up.

"My parents were after my head when they found out I enrolled in history," he said, before shifting to a hysterical falsetto that supposedly resembled his mom's. "'History? Who the hell takes history? Magellan discovered the Philippines. Lapu-lapu killed Magellan. The Spaniards shot Rizal in Luneta. What else is there to know?'" He smiled. "They wanted me to take up nursing or education or something."

"Hey at least you followed your heart." I said. "And sorry for killing Rizal."

He laughed. "OK, I forgive your kind."

I took his phrasebook and started flipping through it.

"But enough about me. Let's talk about you. Did you grow up in Spain?"

"Si, si." I told him. "I only moved to Australia because of my job."

"Wow. You must really like your job."

"Not really," I chuckled. "But it made sense during that time, you know? Going to the other side of the world. Starting fresh. It felt exciting! It seemed like the right thing to do at 25. But you know, one thing led to another and 20 years later, I realize I haven't left Sydney in two decades."

I stared blankly into the window, "Talk about being stuck in a rut."

"Imagine that," he said, looking dumbfounded.

That look, it was on the face of the maître'd the first time I went to a regular haunt without Damian. How I had to tell him, "Table for one, please," and he gave me that look. How he had to ask again and I had to say it again - "Yes, table for one." - as if saying it once wasn't torturous enough. The next few instances, I lied and pretended someone was coming and made frantic phone calls while I ate, until that habit got tiresome and the waiters started noticing.

No one's coming, Carolina, I remembered whispering to myself. No one was coming.

I snapped back. "It's not so bad. I mean, we have dozens of beaches in Sydney. I don't know, around 30 maybe? Everything is less than 30 minutes away, too. Sydney is OK. Everything you want in a city is there. The Opera House. Bondi Beach. Darling Harbour. It's not so bad," I said, trying to remember the last time I went to these places.

"But I really look forward to Pu-gad-pad." I beamed, recalling a tip from my cook, how Filipinos found it "cute" when foreigners butchered local words.

"Pagudpud, you mean?" he asked.

"Pa-gud-pud, yes. Yo quiero la mar, Reynaldo. I love the ocean. Who knows? Maybe I'll say 'Oh what the hell,' email the report to my boss, and never leave Pa-gud-pud."

"What about money?"

"I have savings," I quickly answered. "One of the few perks of having an alimony without the kids, I suppose. I can transfer my retirement fund to a local bank account. If the rates stay as they are, it will last a good fifteen

years. Once I ran out, I can head to Manila for a couple of years, do some consultancy work for a local affiliate, save up, then head back here.”

“You have really thought about this, have you?”
“Or,” I paused, getting a dried mango and grazing Reynaldo’s left hand, “I can give massages by the beach. I do a mean shiatsu.”

“You’ll have some competition,” he said, smiling widely and, to my mind, conceding to this game.

“I’ll lower my price. And I look like Vanessa Redgrave thirty years ago in *Julia*, admit it.”

“I wasn’t born 30 years ago,” he said, and the bus hit a rough bump that jolted most passengers to wakefulness.

OUR BUS SLOWED DOWN TO A WIDE, ROCK-STREWN LOT, BESIDE A BIG roadside cafeteria shortly after La Union. By then I knew that Reynaldo’s ambidextrous because of a first grade penmanship teacher, that he watched Baywatch as a kid, and that when he smiled his eyes disappeared from his face.

We got off, and I smoked my first stick in hours. Long drags. A flicker of ash. Smoke-filled lungs.

Across the street was another empty lot; an unfinished stop in front of it, unpainted concrete walls with street graffiti and faded posters with faces and names and the word “vote.” “One of the dirtiest elections in the world,” he explained, “sometimes literally,” before setting off to get our food.

Primordial sunlight tickled my skin, still pasty and cold from the air-conditioning. I couldn’t believe it - it is Monday, and I’m in a country 3000 miles away. I looked at my watch. By this time, Briana Whitewood and her two boys from next door would be piling up in their car. She’d wave a dutiful “Morning, Carolina,” and I’d wave back, rushing to work, thinking for the nth time if things would have been different - better, more bearable - if Damian and I had kids, never mind that he was always pissed and “not in the mood.”

“Beef, chicken, or seafood,” Reynaldo inquired, appearing from behind me.

“Beef please,” I said, and puffed smoke upward. I had no idea that the sun felt this good in the morning. That the sky was a pompous blue. Five days a week, I drive 17 minutes and walk 120 meters to my office building. In the lobby, I’d find myself nestled among Armani suits similarly rushing

about, before stepping into the perfumed, crowded elevator and punching 27 to get to my floor.

A few minutes later, Reynaldo and I were sitting on a wooden bench, sipping hot instant noodles on a rickety table. He bought a couple of beef wantons for himself. I said no. Mindy would be bringing my latte right about now, reciting my schedule, dumping a ton of paper on my desk. A token how-do-you-do if she's having a good morning. "Is there anything else, Carolina?" she'd ask sweetly, before retreating to her desk for the rest of the day.

"We're almost there," Reynaldo was saying. "We should have taken the plane because Pagudpud is only a couple of hours away by air. But all flights are booked. Everybody's going somewhere during Holy Week."

"No, no it's OK. I actually like long rides. Especially if I'm not driving. Besides, it's still better than being stuck in a hotel. Or worse, coming back to Australia," I laughed awkwardly. "I really appreciate this. Gracias, Reynaldo."

"De na-da, Maam Caro-"

"Oh uh uh," I cut him off, like a middle school librarian. "What did we talk about, Reynaldo?"

"Carolina, Carolina, Carolina" he corrected himself, smirking, and the sound of my name uttered by a foreign mouth sent shivers down my spine. For 20 years, I've heard my name pronounced the English way. It was such a joy to hear it said like this, finally, how it was said in my youth, by the guys before Damian: Ca-ro-li-na.

"De na-da, Carolina," he said.

"So," I began again, stirring my noodles and innocently going for the kill. "How many kids do you have?"

He blushed, "I'm not married. No one has made that mistake yet."

We laughed in unison, while I continued to stir, my other hand resting atop my crossed legs.

"Oh come on, I think you'll make a good husband and father."

"I am not sure about the wife part, but I definitely want kids," he said.

"Oh."

"Do you have kids?"

"No."

"Ah," he said.

"Hey," I tried to smile and shrug off the familiar look. "I heard you guys have amazing beer."

"Yes, we do. Goes down like water, hits like a brick," he promised, and the eyes disappeared. He stabbed a stubborn piece of wanton, blackened with soy sauce. "Like you don't know what hit you."

"Thank you for the pills," I say, deciding to be the adult that I am.

The silence had become unbearable during lunch.

"So you're talking to me again?"

"I didn't get mad at you. Just a bit upset."

"Because I want you to stay here and be happy, for a change?"

"You know it's not as simple as that," I say, desperate to leave it at that.

But I know he won't let it rest, because he's hurt and he wants to hurt me back.

I know men and their egos.

"It can be," he says, stuffing his mouth with rice and chewing rabidly.

I sigh in exasperation.

"It can be," he repeats. "You always tell me how your life in Sydney is so -"

"So what? So sad? So *unbearably* sad? How do you know it'll be better here?" I say.

"Will you stay?"

I can tell he wants to say yes, but if there's anything I learned about Reynaldo, it's his inability to lie.

"I love this place," I say. "And I'm very fond of you."

"Sure."

"But it's just, you know, thinking about it real hard. I don't think it will work, Reynaldo."

I was also silent when Damian came home that Saturday morning, after not coming home for a week, when he told me he loved me, but maybe that's not enough?

"Just imagining it, you know, leaving my life in Sydney, dropping everything I have built, I just can't do it."

"Don't you want kids, Carolina?" he asks abruptly. "The option will not always be there."

"Do you think I don't hear that clock ticking?"

"Then why ask me for some morning-after -"

"Because! Do you have any idea how it will look if I return to Sydney pregnant with a brown child?"

"Oh wow. I see. I understand now."

My first night alone, I spent sitting Indian-style on the floor of the kitchen, clutching an empty mug.

"It's because I'm Filipino, is it?" Reynaldo asks, and I don't know what he's talking about.

I GO OUT AND FIND DOE-EYED GUY SMOKING BY HIMSELF IN THE VERANDA LATER that day. Three empty beer bottles beside him; I've had four. I introduce myself and he nods. I pull my white plastic chair next to his. "May I?" He shrugs. The retreating sun casts shadows in his face that reveal an inner torment that wasn't visible in the height of noon, the company of friends.

"Listen, just out of curiosity. I overheard you and your friends guessing the kind of relationship I have with this guy. So? What was the consensus?"

He takes a deep breath before proceeding in his most deadpan voice, "You guys fuck like dogs in heat. We can hear you. It's not a very thick wall."

"Oh," I squeak, embarrassed. My droopy eyes show signs of animation.

He puffs, inhales, and blows smoke to his right.

"But then there is the laptop, and he *is* constantly working on something while you drink like a fish, so we're not so sure. Personally, I go for sex slave slash personal web designer."

I smile and put a cigarette in my mouth. He fishes a lighter right away and flicks it in front of my face.

The ritual of smokers is the same anywhere in the world.

"So what's really the deal?" he asks.

"Well, work initially. You're right. We *are* working on something, professionally. But you know how things get in the way."

"I know. Things," he chuckles.

The silence is broken only by the occasional vehicle - SUV, tricycle, jeep - that dares invade our view of our raised feet. In the distance, the loud party music from the beach blares, registering as a faint murmur in these dark parts.

"So who *is* that guy?" he says, looking at me for the first time to perhaps tell me he's serious. "Is he from around here, or is he also from wherever you came from or -"

"Let's just say he's a distraction." I look at him triumphantly.

My brain flutters lightly as a feather.

"Things, distraction," he hums, guzzling down more beer.

"I have a question for you," I say. "How does a guy your age know *Send in the Clowns*?"

"Duh. Who doesn't," he hiccups, "who doesn't know Stephen Sondheim? A Little Night Music? Ingmar Bergman?"

"Impressive," I say, nodding my head. "Impressive."

"I'm not gay OK."

I smile at him, "The story of my life."

He thinks this over and nods, "Hey, wen, man-ang," and the hilarity of the local dialect directed to a red-haired Caucasian woman strikes us, and we can't stop laughing.

"So what's the plan now?" he asks after a while.

I say something but the sound of a passing jeep drowns my reply, and he only sees the accompanying smile.

His companions emerge from their room. They smile at me and talk to him. Something about going to the market for their food the next day, he explains, because the girl is getting tired of fish. When they leave, I raise my feet once again to get that laid-back feeling of a few minutes ago, but it's not the same. There's a certain comfort in two pairs of feet raised in abandon, shadows they may be only now.

You know what would be hilarious? I think to myself. If Reynaldo also knew Stephen Sondheim. That would be something.

It's starting to get dark, and I close my eyes for a final puff.

THE PILL, YELLOW AND TINY, THE SIZE OF A PERFECT INKBLOT, SITS PROUDLY on the bedside table. The prolonged staring match seems to amuse Reynaldo, who's on the table fiddling with the laptop settings so we can steal some of the Wi-Fi signal from a nearby resort. I want to download *Send in the Clowns*.

"I went all the way to Laoag for that, Carolina," he says, without looking at me. "It took me more than three hours."

"Now you want me to take it?" I ask. "Make up your mind, brown man."

"Are we going too far with this colonizer-brown man thing?" he narrows his eyes. He slowly makes his way to the bed, and my heart pounds with each step. With an almost sinister glint in his eyes, he sits beside me

and envelops me in one arm. I playfully brush a stray strand of reddish-brown hair and tuck it behind my ear. His tongue, warm and buzzing, starts to probe. His breath reeks of beer. Outside, we can hear the banter of the tourists next door. Dinner is being served, and the owner of the house had been calling us, to no avail.

"Carolina!" I hear my new friend bellow in mock anger. "Remember what I said about the wall?"

I snigger, but Reynaldo's first dry thrust promptly reminds me of the business at hand. A wayward moan escapes my mouth in pain. He gains speed, and I grab on to his sweaty shoulders, wrap my legs around his waist, and arch my back. His warm mouth goes for my breast. Amid the rhythmic shoves, I reach for the pill and nearly topple over my beer. I quickly pop it into my mouth, but it takes a while to go down, small as it is, like a difficult decision. A bitter taste explodes in my mouth. After a few minutes I feel his muscles tighten, and he lets out a subdued moan, the scent of alcohol and desperation wafting in the air. His tongue chases the pill down my throat, only it's too late. He's too late.

"WE'RE LEAVING TOMORROW," DOE-EYED BOY SAYS, LATER THAT NIGHT, BACK at our seats.

"Aw that's too bad!" I tell him, smiling like a fool.

"Yeah. I wish I can stay here forever," he says. "Don't you?"

Without meaning to, that word - "forever" - explodes in the space between my eyes.

It goes to the bridge of my nose, and my chest begins to tighten.

I start to see numbers flashing, floating in mid-air like opaque smoke.

51, 52, 53, 54, 55.

He asks, "Hey are you OK?"

I idly snatch a mug atop the table to distract myself. I try to steady my breathing.

Inhale.

The air molecules enter my nostrils, down my chest, filling up my lungs, into my bloodstream, into the tiniest veins and arteries.

Exhale.

The air rushes out in one long, continuous release, then gathers in front of my face, floating briefly, before arranging into more numbers.

56, 57, 58, 59, 60.

“Carolina?” I feel a pair of arms shaking my shoulders.

“You know,” I tell him, forcing my eyes shut and mentally warding off the phantom figures.

“When you’re my age and you break off a relationship, your first thought is always - always - was that my last chance?”

“Carolina, try not to talk. You’re out of breath.”

“Do I just shrivel up and die now?”

“Carolina, listen to me.”

“But, you know, what can you do? It’s not like it will work *only* because it’s your last chance.”

I return the mug. I regain calm.

“Before you know it, you’re shit scared of the number 60.”

“I’m 22,” he points out.

I inhale a lungful, “You’re very funny, you know. Just you wait.”

He gives me that look.

“Don’t give me that fucking look, you!”

“What?”

“I saw the way you look at your companions. You’re not so lucky yourself.”

“What?” he asks.

“When you’re young and there is no one, you say fuck my life and drink with your friends. Go to the beach and burn something. Am I right? When you’re *my* age and there is no one -”

“What?”

“It’s like, maybe I should’ve said no to that promotion, you know? Maybe I should’ve been more sensitive. He’d been stuck in that teaching job for 15 years, and I was promoted after, what, three?”

Ten seconds of silence. A passing SUV. Crickets.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asks, before fishing his mobile phone from his pocket.

“Let’s just listen to some music, shall we?”

Our agreement to this proposition, we seal by bumping our bottles with such force that they nearly break, a near-accident that only widened our toothy grins.

And it starts to play, a familiar tune, the inimitable first four notes, “Horrible speakers!” I shout, the intro reverberating through the darkness of the street and beyond.

“Isn’t it rich?” we look at each other, smiling. “Are we a pair? Me here at last on the ground, you in mid-air.

“Send in the clowns.”

His companions, joint by the hand, come out of the room. They eye me suspiciously and say something about a late swim and a few beers by the beach.

“Isn’t it bliss?”

“You want to go with us?”

“Isn’t it queer? Losing my timing this late in my career.”

“OK, this one has lost it, “ he says. “Maybe we should call his distraction.”

“Send in the clowns. Where are the clowns?”

They leave and take away my song, and I reach for my pocket for a cigarette. Nothing. Instead, grains of sand.

“Don’t bother, they’re here.”

Sullen and suddenly sober, I return to our room, and Reynaldo’s smile is sweet.