

## THREE KISSES

*Ma. Elena L. Paulma*

THESE MORNINGS, NINA AWAKENED NOT JUST FROM THE cold that numbed her nose, but also from a deep sense of loss, of something missing or forgotten, the cause of which took her some time to remember, perhaps because she did not want to. The cold, although still unbearable, she had learned to live with, but this new sadness which greeted her even before she opened her eyes bewildered her, so that her first consciousness was always that of confusion.

On this her first morning back from the hospital, she wondered at how this bed she was lying on and the gray ceiling above her had remained unchanged. Slowly, so as not to awaken the sleeping man beside her, she turned her head a little so that her eyes just made out the closed door, next to which stood the walnut wardrobe, brought all the way from the old house. Inside would be clothes, his on the left side and hers on the right, neatly folded and hung, carefully arranged according to their colors. Facing the bed was the window. Outside, the flower shrubs that lined the path toward the entrance of the apartment building would be covered with December snow by now, for the flakes had begun to fall last night as they were coming inside. The half-light of the early morning filtered through the coral blue curtains which she had chosen for this room, half-drawn across the window to satisfy both her need for it to be pulled back completely and his desire for it to be fully drawn. Ruben had packed the old beige curtains from the old house, but she had insisted that they buy new ones for the apartment.

She turned her head away from him, sleepily aware of the hazy outlines of the nightstand to her left, on which resided a lamp and a small picture frame standing a little askew. She had dusted and looked at this picture so many times before that she could remember each detail even without looking at it. In it was a photo of a couple during happier times, the younger version of herself smiling up at the man who now lay beside her.

The glass surface of the picture reflected some of the glow from the nightlight which was plugged behind the nightstand. Both of them could not sleep in the dark. She had discovered this on their first night together in the old house at Kessel-lo.

“Can we keep this on?” she had asked, pointing at the lamp that stood on the nightstand, and speaking slowly, for he was just learning how to speak in English. She had been dismayed when he shook his head, “*Nee, nee.*” He bent down behind the nightstand, and there was a click. The sudden glare from the nightlight made his hair look whiter, tracing the smaller wrinkles on his lined face. He turned off the lamp on the table, casting his face in shadow, and for a moment, she had wondered if she had done the right thing.

That had been all of two years ago, she realized with some surprise. When they first met, she had been 62 years old and about to retire from her third managing stint in another dying hotel in Cebu. The daughter of Mrs. Borromeo, owner of The Penthouse, had already begun scolding the staff about the *baduy* arrangement of the seats in the lobby, asking who on earth had told them to put bougainvilleas on the steps leading toward the entrance. Next, she had complained about the bottomless iced tea in the menu. Later, it was the way the napkins had been folded during a wedding reception. The staff had wanted to protect Nina, but they were helpless against the irate questioning of Miss Boromeo.

“Madam Nina told us to, Ma’am,” they had to say.

She had been in a similar situation before. The wife, or sister, or daughter would note how well she got along with the owner and the staff, and how much power she was given over the hotel, and the complaints would begin. She had always been offered a job by one or another of the hotel owners who had become her friends, but at her age, she was not sure anymore if she would still be offered another job in the same position. Nina’s friends, hoteliers like her, had set her up with Ruben, who was a friend of the husband of a friend of a friend now living somewhere in Europe. One

day, she had received a letter from a Ruben Peeters, from 15 Stratenhaus, Kessel-lo, Belgium.

“We gave him your address!” They had all exclaimed at the emergency get-together that had been arranged on account of the letter.

“And your picture,” added Susan, the one closest to her. Nina was meticulous with her looks, making sure to dye her short curls and to dress in the smartest outfits. It was mostly her vivacious warmth, however, that drew others to her.

“He must have been bowled over!” cried another one, and everyone had laughed.

“You shouldn’t have!” she had scolded, looking at the fair-skinned, white-haired, blue-eyed man in the picture that had been included in the letter.

“Dear Saturnina,” she had read to her nieces gathered around her bed, and they had giggled at the way she read her full name with a grimace. One of them had grabbed the picture and said, “Hmmm, not bad. And he’s young, Auntie, only seventy years old.” And everyone had burst into laughter as the picture was passed around. His English had not been perfect but she had answered the second letter, thinking it wouldn’t hurt to have a Belgian pen friend. Susan’s daughter had married a German. She had sent Susan enough money to renovate their house. All of Susan’s friends, including Nina, had gone to the house blessing, where Susan made sure everyone saw the numerous pictures of her daughter in front of beautiful castles and gardens all over Europe. Said daughter had come home looking very glamorous in her European clothing and make-up, handing out lipstick and perfume, and treating everyone to a night at the Casino.

Nina was drawn to the Casino. She loved riding up to the Cebu Plaza Hotel with her friends, alighting at the glass doors and taking the escalator that led them to an arched entrance on the second floor where, in their pearls and georgette blouses, they would stand in excited anticipation as they surveyed the ballroom sized Casino, the green carpet on its expansive floor muting the clinking of trolleys that held chips for the card games and coins for the slot machines over which hovered a haze of smoke. Nina preferred the slot machines, even when the round tipped metal lever that made a satisfying growl at every turn evolved into the red and green buttons that one could press at a higher speed. The excitement was the same, as the images rolled on the round screen and the boxes fell into place, the

*ding ding* as the credits multiplied every time two or three of the images matched. She often ran out of coins, and spent more than she had planned, but she always came back for more because who knows, the next roll might hit the jackpot, and she wasn't one to miss her chances.

Ruben had replied to her first letter, and began calling her long distance after three months. Somehow, she had gotten through the conversations, feeling exhausted after listening closely to Ruben's thickly accented Flemish-English. When he sent her a ticket to Belgium, her friends had shrieked in delight and inundated her with outfits, her nieces giggling as she modelled them around the bedroom.

He looked shorter than she had imagined as he stood waiting for her at the Brussels airport terminal, holding a placard that clearly spelled out her name: Saturnina Dimaculangan. She winced at the unglamorous vowels, but gave him her dimpled smile nevertheless. They shook hands and she had turned on her famous charm. Ruben's face was red from laughing when they arrived at his house. Some of his friends were there, with their Filipina wives, to welcome her.

"Hallo!" They all gathered around her, shaking her hand. Some of the wives laughingly showed her the Belgian kiss. Once, on the right cheek, another on the left, and yet another one on the right cheek again. She was delighted at their niceness, especially when she discovered that some of them also came from the outlying towns of Cebu. After a while, Ruben had taken her away from the excited Bisayan babble, and shown her around his house, which was a sprawling bungalow with large bay windows that looked out onto the green grass that surrounded it. She had been dazzled by the perfectly mown front lawn lined with well-trimmed hedges. She had looked in wonder as he showed her the back of the house, the grass as perfect as the front lawn's. Tall cypress trees marked what Ruben said was the edge of a mini-forest. She had fallen in love.

The next day, he took her around Kessel-lo, showing her the lovely bluegray-roofed *Arenberg* castle which stood stately pink amid the rolling green university grounds. He took her for a walk around the *Provincial Domein*, a huge park with tree-lined paths and white ducks swimming in clear, green ponds. She was enchanted.

"Will you marry me?" Ruben had asked on the fourth night during dinner at the hotel where she was staying. Nina's thoughts often came in images, floating about, following no particular order, and she pondered

on Ruben's proposal this way. She thought of the faded old house left behind by her first husband, its windows perpetually closed to keep out the unrelenting dust and smoke from the busy highway next to which it stood, its first floor well below street level after several highway constructions. The house would be flooded at the merest rainfall for it sat next to a creek. She thought of growing old all alone there in that house, for her son now lived with his wife and four children, and her nieces and nephews would soon be marrying and starting their own families. She thought of having to hunt for another job and the slim chance of her ever getting work again on account of her age. She thought of living on the pittance that would be her SSS pension. Then she thought of living in Ruben's sprawling house with its romantic mini-forest right there in their own backyard. They would sit in the red bricked patio, drink hot chocolate at night, and breakfast on hot coffee and rolls in the morning. During weekends, they could stroll around that nice huge park with the white ducks swimming in the clean ponds, the tall trees waving above their heads. She thought of coming home to the Philippines from time to time in her glamorous new look with huge *balikbayan* boxes, and how she would show her friends and family, and yes, even Mrs. Borromeo's daughter, pictures of herself standing in front of that castle Ruben had shown her, or in the middle of one of the gardens which she would surely be visiting around Europe. Last but not least, she thought of not being alone anymore. She had been a widow for close to twenty years. Having someone nice like Ruben to talk to in the evenings and sharing these growing-old days with was not a bad idea. Not a bad idea at all.

"Yes, I will," she answered. Laughing, he had told her he had practiced this question over and over again in English.

She had laughed with him, saying again, "*Ja*, I will marry you." And he had been delighted at her use of the Flemish word for "yes."

He did not make any protestations of undying love, and she liked that about him. She thought they understood each other better this way. It was honest. These days, and at their age, it made sense to just be practical about things. Rather than living alone apart, why not grow old together? She vowed to use all her hotelier skills in cooking and housekeeping at Ruben's home. He would not be able to live without her after he tasted her special *lumpia*.

Ruben had packed his bags and come home with her to the Philippines. They got married at the Cebu City Hall, with Susan and her husband as

witness. Her only son had been nonplussed, her friends delighted, her relatives surprised but pleased, and she had been happy and excited. Everyone was rolling on high expectations because a better life for one meant a better life for all. This was tradition. There had been a round of *despedida* parties after that.

“Why are you always so lucky? Congratulations and happy trip!” her friends had cried, hugged, and kissed her on both cheeks, a touch of envy in their eyes. “Find us another one like Ruben!” they had cried half-jokingly, half-seriously.

“We will miss you, Madam Nina!” her staff had written on a streamer, some of them in tears as they gave their farewell speeches.

Her son and daughter-in-law, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, brothers, and sisters had gone to the Mactan airport to send them off. There was a lot of crying and hugging and kissing at boarding time, Ruben included. He, too, had been moved by the excess of affection all around, so different from the Belgian way. He told Nina, when they were on board the plane, that he would like to come back and visit again. His eyes were moist when he said it.

“We love you, Lola! We will miss you, Auntie! You take care and write to us often.”

As she lay on her marital bed on this cold Belgian morning, Nina swallowed the familiar lump that rose in her throat every time she remembered her big, noisy family. She now turned her head to the right, and watched the sleeping face of her husband. He looked old and tired. It had been a long time since she had watched him like this. He was always the first one to awaken, from a habit of waking up early for his daily duty as a policeman. She was used to waking up early herself, but these Belgian mornings took a little getting used to, not even after two years. Their first quarrel had been about the heater.

“Turn it up!” she had taken to using simple phrases so he could understand, gesticulating and pointing at the thermostat on the wall next to his side of the bed. “*Nee, nee!*” he would answer, shaking his head.

She would get up in silence, put on more clothes, get back to bed, and lie on her side with her back turned to him. Sometimes, he would sigh, get up, and turn the thermostat up. But sometimes, for some unnameable reason, he wouldn't. These were the times when she would silently cry herself to sleep, feeling like an unwanted guest in a stranger's house, wishing she was not so far away from home.

There was, however, a time shortly after they had flown back to Belgium, when she dared not cross him in any way. This was after their visit to the bank. She and Ruben had gone to the bank to check the safety deposit box which held all of his savings. She had gone with him into the inner room where there were rows of cabinets with rows of little numbered drawers. There he was with his key before one of the drawers, telling her how he had looked forward to finally enjoying the money he had been saving all these years, boasting a little about the bank's security system. He slipped the key into the slot, and drew out the box. When he opened the lid, it was empty.

She could still remember his face, red creeping up from his neck as he swore, she was sure, even though it was in Flemish. It was the first time she had seen him lose his politeness, and it scared her a little. Ruben had told her how much was in the box, and the money amounted to more than a few million in pesos. First, he called to the bank officer standing outside the door, and spoke rapidly, gesticulating. The officer shook his head, also speaking rapidly. She had followed Ruben as he stormed into a room marked "Manager", but after another fiery Flemish exchange, the manager shook his head apologetically. Then they had gone to the police station. Ruben had looked exhausted by this time, and the police, some of whom were his friends, had patted him in the back, and spoken to him quietly until he calmed down. He almost filed a case against the bank, but the bank people had said that the safety deposit box could only have been emptied by a legitimate holder of one of the keys. Only his previous wife held the key and she was dead.

Nina, too, had been devastated. She had just gotten married and the whole clan back home had already seen pictures of her nice new home and her lovely new life. The images in Nina's mind mocked her: the *balikbayan* box filled with Belgian chocolates for her grandchildren, European scarves for her sisters, shirts for her brothers, and trinkets for her nieces, the dinner of grilled, boiled and sautéed seafood with the whole clan at *Sutokil*, her treat. She sighed. There was always the *balut* at the *Fuente* plaza.

Ruben barely ate nor slept for a long time after that. Sometimes, he would walk around the house opening drawers and closets, boxes and bags, tapping on walls and floors. Sometimes, he would sit in the living room without moving, just staring out the window. When he spoke, it was always about what had happened at the bank, beginning in English, and progressing to angry Flemish. Nina would learn that, owing to a deprived

childhood, Ruben had tried to live a well-planned and well-executed life, in command of everything, from his career to his first marriage, right up to his retirement savings. She learned of it slowly.

“Don’t wear make-up anymore. You’re just wasting your mōney and eet’s not healthy anyway. Not goodt.” She had said, “*Ja*,” and had stopped wearing make-up, to humor him at this time of misery.

“You should eat less *vlees* and more *groente*. Eet’s healthier. *Vlees* not goodt.” She had said, “*Ja*,” and had stopped eating meat, to placate him at this difficult time, consuming more vegetables than she had ever eaten while growing up in her father’s small farm in Liloan, Cebu.

She could not buy any food for herself anyway. Belgian husbands, she discovered, did not let the wives handle the money. She had married into the wrong nationality.

He was very impatient with her while he taught her the Flemish language. “*Goeiendag*” was easy to learn for that’s what he would say every morning while nudging her awake at exactly seven o’clock, which was the worst part of the day in her opinion. Soon, she was able to say, “*Nee, nee*” in perfect Flemish fashion, with an irritable “*Alstublief*” (please) when he would persist and she was still sleepy. The phrase she liked best was “*Ik begrijp het neit*” for it shut him up. It meant, “I don’t understand.”

Nina looked upon herself as a very patient and fairly tolerant and forgiving person. But this individual she was living with would not let her *be*. He was everywhere she was, telling her what to do and what not to do, from the time she woke up to the last conscious moment before she turned to the merciful blankness of sleep. She turned to her rags, wiping the windows, the divan, chairs and tables in the living room, each crystal droplet on the chandeliers, each rung, armrest and foot of each wooden chair in the dining room, the surface of the formal dining table, the four carved legs of the dining table, crawling down on all fours to wipe the surface *under* the table. She wiped the top of the kitchen sink, the sides of it, the grooves between the tiles, every can, bottle, and canister she could find in every cupboard. Ruben would follow her around, thrusting the Windex spray for surfaces at her face and saying, “Use this! Use this!” to which she would reply, “*Ik begrijp het neit*,” turning away from him to wipe the kitchen table all over again. He would shut up with a perplexed look because he had spoken in English.

Sometimes, she would stand by the window and watch the silent, empty street outside, missing the jeepneys, the smoke and the dust, even the stray



dogs that plied the busy highway she had once wanted to escape from. None of those who had married foreign husbands, even Susan's daughter, had spoken about the long, cold days that seemed to stretch and stretch, one day merging into the next in a perfect pattern of sameness that mirrored the uniform hedges lining the immaculate streets. Ruben was a prostate cancer survivor. His doctors had told him to take it easy after his trip to the Philippines, so aside from the few trips to nearby Leuven City, they seldom went anywhere beyond the town limits of Kessel-lo. It was not long before she stopped taking pictures of the single castle or watching the ducks as they swam in the park pond, a perfectly bored look on their beaked faces.

It took Ruben a long time to get over his loss. There was not a speck of dust in the house, and all the cupboards sported perfectly aligned cans in alphabetical order.

"I worked hard and scrimped and saved – and now the money is all gone, just like that," he would moan in broken English, smattered with a lot of Flemish, only a few words of which she could understand. Then, he would call the bank and swear into the phone, in Flemish, but she could tell from his tone. She felt his agony, oh how she felt it like it was hers. This went on until she told him one day, "Ruben, I am learning more curse words every time you call the bank."

"Really?" he asked, using the English he had learned from her. "Really," she replied, and she proceeded to curse him in perfect Flemish.

Things had gotten better after that until the day they visited his daughter. Ruben seldom saw his son and daughter, and they rarely called. The family came together only for Christmas dinner, and the gatherings were always minus the son. On Christmas day, a few months after the discovery of the empty safety deposit box, they had gone to Ida's place. Ruben and his son-in-law were drinking after-dinner beer in one corner of the living room when Ruben stood up, so suddenly, that everyone turned to look at them.

"My wife gave the key to my son?" Ruben had spoken quietly, his face slowly reddening.

His daughter started to step out of the room, but he turned to her and said, "And you split the money between the two of you?" Ida glared at her husband, but she did not deny her father's accusation. Then, as if making up her mind, she turned to her father, showing all the bitterness she had been hiding behind her polite smile. "We had to. Otherwise, all of it will go to your new... wife." she had said in English, not looking at Nina. "That

is our money, too...and...and so is the house! You better sell it. We want our share. You better sell it or we will sue,” so saying, she had stomped out of the room. Nina could not remember all that was said. Ruben did not say much, but his face had been very red. He just looked at them all, and they all looked back at him in silence. And she just knew it was time to go.

“I will face them in court,” Ruben had fumed that night, cursing again in Flemish. Nina’s pride was hurt. She was not going to let them think that she had married this Belgian for his money alone. “Ruben, going to court would be such a waste of money and effort on our part. We cannot maintain this place anymore, anyway. Why don’t we just sell it, and give them their share. Besides, it is too big for the two of us. We can always stay in a smaller apartment. Easier to clean.” Nina suddenly felt too old for all the excitement that was happening. All she had wanted was a nice, quiet life.

“Let us just get this over with and let us live in peace,” she had said to Ruben.

She had cried inside when the last of their belongings had been packed into the moving van and they drove away from the place she had fallen in love with. The apartment in Heverlee was smaller, just one among many in a building which was occupied mostly by old or dying Belgians. With this second loss, things in the Peeters household went back to what had become normal, with Ruben following Nina around carrying his spray and muttering in Flemish, as the apartment glowed from all the cleaning. Time was the only thing Nina had in abundance. That, and a cranky old Belgian husband. Too much time, in her opinion, for it made her think. Nina had grown up believing in commitment and in saving face. Going home a divorced woman, a poor divorced woman, at her age was unthinkable. It had a ring of defeat to it. And Nina had always been a winner, the one with the better life than all her siblings, the manager of hotels in the city, the wife of a dollar-earning seaman, the generous giver of gifts. No, there was no way she could go home now. But the thought was there, peeping at her from behind her husband’s white hair, lurking in the shadows of their bedroom closet, beckoning to her in broad daylight as she stared out the window like a caged bird. Ruben and Nina perfected their politeness, to each other and to the world outside. Often, Ruben’s friends would invite the couple to their homes for early evening *avondmaal*. Whenever this happened, Nina put on the clothes she had brought from the Philippines, and the women would go ooh and aah, asking her where she had gotten such nice clothes for

there was not much to choose from in quiet Heverlee. She quickly became friends with the Filipina wives who started calling her Ma'am Nina even before a new arrival from the Philippines recognized her.

"Madam Nina!" Claire had exclaimed.

"Why, it's Claire! *Kumusta?*"

Claire had turned to the others and proudly said, "Madam Nina was my manager at the Hotel Miranda." All the others exclaimed at this for most of them came from the *barrios* of Cebu. Nina shushed them, saying, "Let's have none of that here." She had meant it. Unofficially, though, she became their Ma'am Nina, the one they turned to every time they had problems of any sort. Nina obliged, used to a role which had always been hers from way back home.

After one such party, Brent and his Filipina wife, Pacita, brought Nina and Ruben home. She had told Pacita that she missed eating meat and Pacita had wrapped a piece of *bifteke*, placing it into Nina's "bring-home" bag. Ruben politely asked them into the house for an *elixir*, but he was in one of his moods, Nina could tell. She was grateful to whoever had invented the unfailing politeness of Belgians, for it gave her some respite from his picker-snicketing. But she found she had concluded too hastily. Ruben had followed her into the kitchen after settling their visitors in the living room.

"Why do you have to take home food! It does not look good! Do you want them all to think that we don't have food of our own?" he began. Nina was regretting having taught him so much English. She was beginning to understand him.

"It is a Filipino custom to give food to your guests after a party. It's called "bring-home," she had said, holding it up. He grabbed the paper bag and opened it. Lifting the meat from the wrapper, he held it close to her face.

"I told you not to eat *vlees* anymore," so saying, he flicked on the disposal chute in the sink and looking at Nina, threw in the meat, bag, and wrapper.

Nina gaped at him, unbelieving. She turned and walked out of the kitchen, calling to Pacita who stood up from where she was seated in the living room. Taking Pacita's hand, Nina pulled her towards the kitchen. Ruben had followed her out, but he had to stay in the living room with his guest because it was impolite to leave him alone for too long. Nina felt like telling her husband where he could stick his politeness. As soon as the kitchen door swung close, Nina turned to Pacita.

“I wan to get out of here!” she whispered fiercely. Pacita reached out to hold her hands, saying, “Ma’am Nina, what’s the matter?”

“*Di na ko! Di na jud ko!*” she continued, using Bisayan in both relief and exasperation.

“Is it Ruben?”

“I cannot understand him at all! *Di na ko!*”

“Why, what happened?” Pacita asked, drawing Nina towards a kitchen chair.

Nina pointed to the disposal chute. “Thank you for the *biftek*. At least one Belgian cockroach family will be happy tonight.”

“*Hesusmaryosep!* What has gotten into Mr. Ruben! But you know, my first husband was like that also, Ma’am Nin. Okay, what can I do?”

“I don’t know. I can’t think.”

“Listen,” Pacita began, “Brent is coming over tomorrow.” And they had hatched a plan in the kitchen, the first of many.

Nina did not speak to Ruben that night, and he was quite eager to welcome Brent when he came back the next day. Pacita winked at Nina as they entered the apartment. The two women went immediately to the kitchen, leaving the men in the living room.

“Are you ready ?” Pacita asked excitedly.

“I am! But first, let me get my millions.” Nina rolled her eyes at Pacita as she reached up and opened the corner cupboard which held the coffee beans. She took out a can marked *Anheuser Busch InBev*, a brewing company in the city of Leuven, where Pacita and she were planning to go. It was a major city two miles from the town of Heverlee.

“I had to fish this out of the garbage bin, you know. That husband of mine is garbage crazy!” She pried open the can with a spoon and reached inside.

“Tadaaa!” she cried as she proudly held out a hand filled with rolled bills and some coins saved surreptitiously after market days. Pacita clapped her hands, singing, “Let’s go shooopping!” And they stepped out of the kitchen.

“We’re thinking of making *Tomates aux Crevettes!*” Pacita sang as the kitchen door swung close behind them. Both men in the living room simply raised their hands and gave a thumbs-up sign because it was a favorite Belgian appetizer.

“Problem is, we’re out of fresh tomatoes and shrimps,” Pacita continued.

“I think we have some in the refrigerator,” Ruben said, his eyes directed somewhere between Pacita and his wife.

“We checked them and they’re almost spoiled.” Nina confirmed, looking between her husband and Brent. She had made sure to place them way at the back of the freezer for she could not bear to dump them down the disposal chute, which had been their first wild idea.

“Then let’s buy some,” said Brent, turning back to Ruben. Ruben said nothing.

“So drive me to the shop,” Pacita told her husband.

“You know how to drive, don’t you?” Brent responded.

“You know I can’t drive when I’m alone in the car. It makes me nervous,” said Pacita. “If you don’t want to take me, perhaps Ruben can?”

“Brent and I are not finished yet. Why don’t you and Nina go,” Ruben replied, beginning to sound impatient.

“Is that okay with you, Nina?” Pacita asked innocently.

“Okay,” said Nina, her voice calm and cool, as if she couldn’t care less if she went or stayed, as if her heart was not beating fast.

They walked slowly past their husbands as Pacita said, “Oh, I hope there will be some fresh tomatoes and shrimps at the town market!”

“I know. Last week we had to go to Leuven,” Nina said loudly, putting on her coat. “I sure hope we don’t have to do that!”

Pacita opened the door. “Brrr, it’s so cold outside!” Pacita shivered, intimating that she would rather have stayed inside. The men could see her from where they were seated. She stepped outside, then suddenly, as if she had forgotten something, she turned and called to her husband, “Oh, Brent, we might have to go to Leuven for the shrimps! We’ll be back soon!” and she shut the door, before anyone could say anything.

They hurried to the car and got in. Turning to each other, they did high fives and cried, “Yes!!!”

The minute the car turned toward the main road, Nina and Pacita let out a whoop. Nina lifted her arms and waved her hands at the sky, loving the brown road, the wide expanse of green on both sides, the occasional trees and buildings, the sheer absence of the insufferable man she was stuck with.

These brief get-aways occurred more than once, especially during the times when Nina felt the urge to run as far away from her husband as possible. Pacita, who was two decades younger than Nina, became Nina’s

accomplice. They enjoyed the planning and subterfuge as much as the trip itself which had to last for but a few hours, with Ruben waiting for their return. For Nina, these were reminders of earlier times when she could just get up and go without having to ask another person if it was okay that she step out for a while, without being asked, where are you going? for how long? with whom? why? what are you going to do? why?

Midway into the second year of their marriage, Nina's grandson had called to tell her he was graduating from High School.

"He begged me to come home for his graduation," she told Ruben.

"You will go home only for the graduation?" he asked, hinting that it was not that big of a deal.

"It is a very important occasion for us Filipinos," she continued.

"Okay, we will go," Ruben relented after two days.

The next day over rolls at breakfast, Nina began, "The graduation is in April, which is a summer month," she had paused for it to sink in.

While they were eating lunch later that day, she said, "It is very hot in the Philippines during summer, you know. I hope they will think of putting up a tent."

"Why, where is it going to be held?" he asked.

"Graduations are usually held in the open fields because there will be many, no throngs of people coming in to attend," Nina knew Ruben had developed rashes in the heat the last time he was in the Philippines, and he hated huge crowds.

Holding out a plate of strawberries, Nina added casually, "The program will surely start a little past noon time, maybe around 2pm because graduations usually last for several hours." She glanced at Ruben who was beginning to look worried.

"I'm just worried about your health," she told him with some concern in the afternoon, as she was peeling potatoes for the *frites*.

"Maybe we should not go anymore," Nina suggested as she bit into her egg at dinner time. "Do you want more wine?" and Ruben had silently handed her his glass, deep in thought.

"Why don't you go, and I'll stay. I don't think I can bear the heat and the crowd. It's only going to be for two weeks, anyway," Ruben had said as he climbed into bed that night.

"Of course not. I won't go without you," Nina said before turning off the lamp for the night.

The next day, Ruben bought a round-trip Brussels-Cebu ticket for one Mrs. Saturnina Peeters. And that was how Nina was able to visit her family, without him. Nina could hardly sleep in the weeks that followed. She cooked enough food for Ruben to last for a month, even though she was only going to be in the Philippines for two weeks. Perhaps a part of her wanted to believe that she was not coming back for a long time, or maybe she did not want to think about what would happen once she stepped on the plane that would take her home. She kept herself busy with her packing, careful not to show too much eagerness lest Ruben think that she was excited to be leaving him. She was conscious of these thoughts, but less conscious of the fact that she was concerned about what he would feel.

It was only when she was on the plane to the Philippines that she allowed the thoughts she had only been vaguely aware of while in Belgium. Her mind took wing even as the plane lifted off from Belgian soil. She realized that she did not have to go back to Belgium. She could leave Ruben for good. These thoughts came and went as she slept through half the trip and attended to which gates and which flights she was supposed to be in during the long, long way home. They lay half-forgotten at the back of her mind as she was embraced and fussed over by her friends and family waiting at the arrival area of the Mactan airport.

She ate all the lechon, afritada, and adobo prepared almost every night for her. She hardly slept from all the midnight conversations, and the visits to the Casino. Ruben called everyday from Belgium, and Nina found herself clearing her schedule around three in the afternoon, which was the time he called. She thought she did this from a sense of duty, ignoring the sense of anticipation that accompanied her waiting for his call.

Sometimes, Ruben could not get hold of her through her cell phone.

“Uncle Ruben called!” a niece would tell her.

“He called on my phone, too!” her sister would say.

“And in mine!” her son would pipe in.

“Hallo! How are you?” Ruben would begin every time he got hold of her.

“I’m all right. And you?” Nina would reply.

“Oh, I was wondering how to heat up the *lumpia*?” He had many excuses for calling – he could not find his glasses, he wanted to know how to heat up the *ensaymada*, he wanted to know how the graduation went, and so on and so forth.

After one such conversation, she had decided that it was not fair to Ruben if she was to desert him this way. The man was just helpless without her. She was also beginning to realize how she had gotten too accustomed to the neat Belgian life. She now found the Philippines too crowded and too noisy, its streets too congested and its houses lacking in the amenities she had gotten used to in Belgium. At least, this was what she thought as the main reasons for her desire to go back to Belgium. At unguarded moments, however, she would recall with perplexity the way she had felt when Ruben handed her that ticket for home.

He had gone to Leuven and come back in the afternoon. As soon as he came in, he had handed Nina an envelope.

“What’s this?” Nina asked, opening the envelope. Inside was her ticket.

“I told you I did not want to go to the Philippines without you,” Nina said, and had been surprised at what she felt inside. She had meant it.

Although she tried to dismiss it, she would recall this feeling again when she came back to Belgium, on one of her get-away trips with Pacita. The trips had become less frequent after her return from the Philippines, her need for it having become less desperate. She attributed this to the long break she had just had.

It was but a regular moment in an ordinary day at Leuven, but because of its singularity, she remembered that a little boy and his mother had been walking by when it happened. She remembered the exact spot down the layered, cobbled street where she and Pacita had been standing. She remembered that a street sign on a corner signpost had spelled *Munstraat*. She remembered how the afternoon sun had shown on a building marked *Oude Markt*, the shadow of a nearby roof sharply outlined on its walls. She and Pacita were on their way to their car, carrying their purchases, talking about another Filipina whose Belgian husband had just died.

“Ma’am Nina,” Pacita always spoke in their Bisayan language whenever they were alone, “are you going to sell the apartment when Ruben, you know, goes?”

“When he goes?” Nina repeated, as much to herself as to Pacita, surprised at the strangeness of this thought.

“Yes when he goes,” Pacita continued, oblivious to the sudden stillness in her friend’s face. “You know, it is very difficult for Brent and myself right now. His siblings are contesting the will my first husband left behind. His



father gave me a share of the property, you know.” Pacita had married the son of her first husband.

Nina replied absently, “Well, I noticed that most Belgians live to a nice old age. Did you notice that? In our apartment, almost everyone is aged 90 years old and up. I think Ruben will live up to a hundred.”

It was the thought which came after her words that Nina would often recall for its oddness every time she was alone in the bathroom or when Ruben was asleep, which were the only times she had to herself. She had wished it were so - that Ruben would live to a hundred.

The man in her thoughts began to stir beside her, and Nina closed her eyes, wishing to still be alone with her thoughts. She sensed him looking at her, felt him moving away from her to the other side of the bed, very slowly. His side of the bed inclined a little as he sat up, slid his feet to the floor, and bent down, and she knew he was putting on his loafers. The mattress shifted and was still as he left the bed, all these done with a minimum of movement. There was a moment of silence as the carpet underneath muffled his steps. Then she heard the door opening and closing softly. She was grateful that he had not tried to wake her as he normally would, recalling another morning about three months ago. His nudging had drawn a yelp from her. From the wrist down, her right hand was burning with pain.

“What is it?” he had sounded scared.

“My hand hurts. I can’t move the fingers.” She held out her hand awkwardly. Ruben had gone to the closet and started getting dressed.

“Where are you going?” she had exclaimed.

“We are going to the doctor,” he replied.

There was one thing that Nina did not like. It was going to doctors while she was in pain, for they only made it worse with their prodding and poking.

“No, I’m all right, really. Please do not let us go to the doctor.” But Ruben had insisted. As it turned out, she had needed an operation for a vein had literally frozen from the cold. Ruben had done all the chores while it was healing.

She moved to look at that hand now, but another pain stopped her. As if it could not help itself, her left hand moved from where it had been lying on the mattress. It crept across her stomach, up towards her chest, and as if afraid of what it might find, it stopped. But she already knew, of course, even as her fingers found the edges of the bandage that covered

the area where her right breast used to be. The truth startled her still, every morning.

Had it only been two weeks since that first phone call? She pondered at how such a significant loss could happen in so little time, and so quietly. The doctor had called after their annual medical check-up.

“Nina, this is Hans. Is Ruben home?” Hans did not normally call after a check-up.

“*Ja*,” she replied and silently handed the phone to Ruben who had come into the kitchen.

“Hallo?” Ruben spoke into the phone. There was a moment of silence as he listened to Hans on the other end. Nina had taken a seat in the kitchen table, pretending to be busy mixing the eggs and cream for their lunch *a la flamande*.

“Hans, are you sure?” Ruben whispered into the phone. Then he nodded. “*Ja*, I will tell her. She’s right here.”

Nina watched as he slowly placed the handset onto its base. His expression scared her. She did not want to hear what Ruben had to say, whatever it was, and began to rise from her seat.

“Am I dying?” Nina joked. She wanted to be her usual cheerful self.

Ruben was silent. He looked like he was unsure of how to say what he had to say. Finally, she whispered, “What is it?”

Ruben drew close and held her shoulders with his hand, as if to keep her from falling. “You have breast cancer.”

Nina had felt her limbs go limp, as she dropped back to her seat. Ruben sat down, too, and reached out his hand, as if to comfort her.

They had gone to the hospital where Nina underwent what the doctor had termed a “simple mastectomy”. Simple. She almost smiled at the word. Had it already been a week since that first morning after the operation? Each morning since had felt unreal, six mornings of awakening with this strange body and its missing part. There was something terribly funny about her situation, on top of everything else, but she could not remember the joke.

The bedroom door opened slowly, and a wooden tray hovered in mid-air through the gap. On the tray were arranged two cups of coffee, a plate of steaming rolls, and a small slab of her favorite Namur butter. Next to the butter stood a thin vase on which resided a single stem topped by a perfectly yellow tulip, also her favorite. Above the tray was a face with a tentative smile.

“Good morning,” he said.

“*Goeindag*,” she said.

Nina watched as Ruben came forward carefully balancing the tray, her eyes following his every move as he deposited the tray onto the nightstand to her left. She tried to raise herself, but he was there before she could move, lifting her bodily but gently, so she could rest her back against the pillows which he hurriedly propped up behind her. She didn't have to stay in the hospital for a week, but Ruben had insisted that they wait until the drain from her incision was removed from her body.

“I can still move, you know,” she said, trying to sound light-hearted, “but *dank u*.”

She could not raise her right arm for her nightgowns and had slept in her robe. She tugged at its edges now to hide her lopsided chest. He bowed his head to allow her the slight movement, picking up the tray from the table and gently placing it in front of her. He poured coffee onto the two cups and held one cup toward her.

“*Dank u!*” she said, smiling at the cup.

“*Zonder dank*,” said he, raising his cup before bringing it down to his lips.

Placing his cup on the tray, he picked up a knife and buttered a roll. He handed it to her, then he buttered another one for himself.

“You remembered,” she said, lifting her eyes from the tray and smiling at him, her left cheek dimpling.

“Hunh?” he said, chewing faster to clear his mouth.

She fingered the lace on the white cloth that covered the tray, her eyes on him, the smile still on her face. She had told him to always place a cloth over the breakfast tray.

“Oh, hmm, hmmm,” he nodded vigorously several times, still chewing, raising his eyebrows at the cloth on the tray, and rolling his eyes toward her. The slight movement juggled the tray a little and he steadied it.

“Oooops!” he exclaimed, eyes widening, looking at her, and she laughed with him.

They finished eating in familiar silence. Afterwards, he lifted the tray from the bed and placed it on the nightstand. Then he stood up. Nina thought he looked tall from where she was.

“Bath time,” he said, smiling, in imitation of the nurse who had assisted Nina with her baths in the hospital.

“What?!”

“Bath time.”

“*Nee!*” She looked at him, shaking her head “*Nee, nee!*”

“*Ja, ja.*”

He sat down next to her, and looked her in the eye.

“It’s okay,” he said.

She bowed her head, fingering the edges of her robe. When she looked up at him, he had not taken his eyes off her.

“It’s okay,” he said again softly, lowering his head, and looking at her steadily.

Still looking at him, she gave an almost imperceptible nod. He stood up, and bent down to gently help her up, as she slid first her left foot, then her right, onto the floor. They slowly walked towards the bathroom door, her left hand on his right arm, as on that day they had walked towards the judge, and gotten married.

He sat her on the closed toilet bowl, turned toward the bathtub and twisted the knobs. Nina concentrated on the sound of the running water. Ruben turned to her. Nina was holding on to the edges of her robe, but Ruben took her hands and lay them down on her lap, first one, then the other. He began to unravel the silk knot that held her robe together and again, she lifted both her hands to cover the ugliness of her chest. But he gently placed his hands over hers and drew them down again. He drew open the edges of the robe as Nina bowed her head, afraid to see the look of disgust in his eyes. Her left breast hung old and wrinkled, the right part of her chest covered with white bandage. She watched as Ruben slowly removed the tapes that held her bandage and winced as her wound was finally revealed. She lifted her head for she could not bear to look at the drying blue-black tissues, the Frankenstein sutures on the puckered flesh still red from the recent trauma.

Ruben met her lifted face and kissed both her moist eyes. He kissed her right cheek, then her left, then her right again, in Belgian fashion, until she smiled because it was ridiculous to be exchanging polite kisses there in the bathroom with her seated on the toilet seat, one wrinkled breast hanging between them. Then he kissed her on the lips, softly, and it was his turn to smile for she kissed him back.

Nina’s eyes were on him as he knelt on the bathroom floor and bent his head, the soft light from the bathroom lamp turning his white hair

into silver, gentling his blue eyes and casting a golden glow onto his lined face.

He kissed her left breast. Then very gently, he moved his head to place soft little kisses around her scar.

The water continued to gush from the faucet, both hot and cold streams mingling in swirls at the bottom of the tub, as the steam began to rise.