

SIREN

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Anna heard the door opening down the hall. She put her head back down under the sheet, but she still heard the beat of her mother's heavy steps and the slap of her slippers against the soles of her feet. When she heard the jangling of keys she could not resist opening her eyes and poking her head out of the blanket. When she heard her march past her bedroom she could not hold back her relief.

When her mother got that way there was no stopping her and there was no talking her out of anything. She didn't hear anything or mind anything either. So Anna promptly aborted the siesta, slipped out of bed, and followed her, a good length behind. She didn't dare go down the stairs until her mother had stepped off the bottom step. She gripped the balustrade only as soon as her mother let go of it. She followed her past the dining room, where what remained of lunch still lay on the table. Her father always had the cleanest plate, his fork and spoon at five o'clock and the glass emptied on its coaster as though it hadn't been touched.

Anna followed her to the kitchen, where the rice cooker had been left open. A trail of ants was already making its way toward its rim and a darkening swarm was already advancing up the kitchen table toward her birthday cake.

They had ordered it from the neighborhood bakeshop the way she wanted it, in dark chocolate chiffon and rainbow frosting. She had passed that bakeshop on her bike rides ever since they moved in at the beginning of the summer. They had that cake for dessert that day, and they were going to have it—maybe along with the spaghetti and meatballs, the fried chicken and the red potato salad that Clara prepared—into the next two or three days.

The night before, she had insisted on waiting for her father to arrive from work before they started eating, and just as it seemed too late, he came, honking his horn from halfway down the street. She shouted for Clara to open the gate. Her mother came down in one of those dresses she only wore on special occasions.

She also wore her special watch and large pearls on her ears. Those pearls were sold to her by a neighbor who showed up at their door with a bottle of wine one afternoon, who turned out to be a distant relative, who turned out to be a jeweler, who came to the house almost every week after that with all kinds of treats. Sometimes it was cupcakes, sometimes it was just banana cue. She always brought some jewelry to show Anna's mother.

On one of those visits she took out a little pouch of pearls. "South Sea!" she whispered, like she was telling her mother a big secret. Anna was at the table and Clara was always around to refill their glasses and their coffee cups so it couldn't really have been a secret.

Before the visit was over her mother agreed to buy the two largest of them by installment. "It's an investment," she said to the woman, and then, later on, to her daughter. She had put them on her ears and swept her hair back. She bent down toward her daughter to show them off.

Instead of a bicycle with a ribbon around it, her father walked in with a small gift-wrapped box. Anna tore away the wrapper and found the battery-operated bike horn inside, just the model she had seen on that very bike in the shop they had visited weeks ago. But a very large part of her still hoped that the bike lay hidden somewhere, secretly reserved weeks ago, returned for by his father on one of his lunch breaks, picked up earlier that day, and wedged into the trunk of the car with the help of store clerks, or sitting in the backseat, cushioned by folded newspapers, camouflaged by the black nylon jacket his father always had over his office chair, and trundled home at careful speed.

But as Clara set down the coffee tray in front of his father, turning it carefully so that the cup and saucer faced him, and as Anna nursed the lump that had sat in her throat since the beginning of dinner, her father told her that the bike would come around on her very next birthday, if she kept her grades.

There was only the spaghetti and the fried chicken and the cake and the salad and the horn, then.

That night, she resigned himself to this fate and strapped the horn on the handlebars of her old bicycle. Though it was late, she begged him, and her father allowed her to try it out. She stuck the two leads on the 9-volt battery, sat on the seat, and tried out all the sounds the horn could make. There was a buzzer sound and three different siren sounds. There was a wail made of two alternating notes that she often heard in foreign movies. There was a sad, lazy, wavy sound that she associated with housefires—she had seen a couple not far

from where they lived—and the late arrival of firetrucks. There was also the urgent police sound that she also often heard whenever there were car chases on TV, but never in real life. There was a fake bell sound that was her favorite, because it reminded her of their old doorbell back in Quezon City.

Anna stuck her hand out to keep the back door from slamming and followed her mother out through the unfinished garden in the back. She even followed her as she ignored the meandering stone path to the maids' quarters and trampled on the freshly laid squares of grass, something Anna had been severely forbidden to do. Her mother tried three or four keys from the bunch before she found the right one, the twisting doorknob and the opening door, making loud sounds in the middle of the quiet afternoon.

Her mother entered the room and Anna entered the room behind her, careful not to touch her, trying to stand as much as possible where her mother couldn't see her. They were just two small steps apart now. Anna wondered where Clara was as she watched her mother pull at the handles of the closet doors with both hands hard, once, twice, the way her father taught her to play tug-of-war, until there was a snapping sound as the locks gave and the doors opened like a mouth letting go of a long-held breath, smelling of sawdust and fresh paint and baby powder.

Inside the closet Clara's clothes were neatly stacked in a small pile against the back wall. Her other things were neatly organized in the foreground. It reminded Anna of the altar her grandmother kept back in the province, with the big Santo Niño in the background and the candles and prayer books and religious figurines huddled around its plaster pedestal, painted white and pale blue to make it look the Santo Niño was standing on a cloud.

Her mother reached into the closet and Anna heard her nails scratch against the wall as she scooped everything out. Framed photos, plastic bottles of deodorant and cologne, ceramic figurines, the blouses and t-shirts Clara wore on her days off. She had never realized how small Clara was. They looked like little-girl clothes, with colors like pink and baby blue.

Her mother wasn't quite done yet. She pulled out Clara's drawers and dumped all their contents on the floor: hairclips, sanitary napkins, tubes of worn-down lipstick, all sorts of stuff tumbling on Clara's clothes. She bent down and swept out the low closet compartment, coaxing out a tumbled mess of slippers and shoes.

His mother held the closet doors open and moved aside to let the light in from the window. She looked inside and made sure there was nothing left. She sifted through the stuff on the floor with her feet, breaking apart the

clumped clothes and the piles of letters with the thick tip of her slipper. Anna wondered what kind of music was on those CDs and who would write Clara so many letters, or why anyone would.

Her mother caught sight of an old candy canister, and Anna knew she was wondering how Clara had gotten hold of it. Her mother knocked it aside and when it didn't open she kicked it against the wall. The lid popped off and when she saw what it contained she knelt on the floor, planting her knees on the cushion of blouses and t-shirts. She fished out a tangle of beads and baubles from the can and clawed the trinkets apart with her hands, flicking each item away as she inspected them.

She blew an exhausted, frustrated breath, looked briefly at Anna, then returned her attention to the room. She pulled the sheet off the bed and gave it a good snap, the air catching the dust. She grasped the mattress, dragged it to the floor, inspected the wooden bedframe, and brushed past Anna out the door, back into the unfinished yard, her slippers turning up clods of grassy earth.

Anna followed her from right at the tip of her shadow, almost making a game of it. When her mother entered the kitchen again and the shadow disappeared she counted five floor tiles behind her, then four steps below her as she climbed the stairs.

They walked up the hall back to Anna's room. Clara was there. She had upturned the beds and unloaded her closets. They seemed to be playing a game. Anna felt his heart leap as she thought of the things she had hidden there, behind old stuffed toys, under stacks of old textbooks. Her diaries, the secret stash of books she had filched from the library, the photos of boys she had clipped from magazines and printed out from websites. Everything lay front and center as though Clara had known all along where she had hidden them, all the way from when they were living in that small apartment in Quezon City.

It didn't seem so then, but now she remembered their neighbors as noisy and troublesome, cranking up their karaoke music so early in the day, stinking up the air with the smell of frying and the smell of barbecue, keeping them awake with their music and off-key singing until way past midnight. The women were always cooking and the men were always drinking, their white plastic tables and chairs spilling out of their tiny garage into the street. There was something about the way they looked at Clara whenever her mother sent her out to the store on an errand. They quieted down and nudged and whispered to each other and looked at her openly when she returned.

This was probably the reason why Clara was under strict instructions to keep Anna indoors whenever she was home. Clara made her toasted bread with butter and sugar while she did her homework in the dining room that was also the kitchen. At three in the afternoon she turned off the TV in the living room, sent Anna up for her siesta, and went down to do the laundry and listen to the afternoon drama on her radio.

Always, just as Anna was almost lulled to sleep by the afternoon heat, the buzz of tricycles and the jeeps and the karaoke next door would rouse her. Restless, woozy, she would creep down and sit on the stairs and listen to Clara's radio shows while Clara hung up the wash on the clothesline.

Clara's favorite was a half-hour drama where a man and woman were on the run from the law for a crime they didn't commit. The man had a deep voice that immediately made you think he was handsome and strong, and the woman sounded like she was always on the brink of falling apart. The police colonel who was after them sounded old and cruel, and his henchmen were always cracking jokes and making fun of each other. They made sure it ended with something that was supposed to make you want to tune in the next day, like right before a big revelation, or in the middle of a chase scene with the cops almost closing in on them.

Anna followed that story as far as she could, until the day they moved house and she couldn't pick up the radio show from the laundry area even if she strained her ears.

Today, all of a sudden—as though it were part of the game, Anna's father was there, despite the fact that it was still afternoon, and she heard her mother tell him how she had just left her pearls out on the dresser for a few minutes while she spoke on the phone, and that only Clara had access to the dressing area.

"That girl," his mother muttered. "She was in the room when I took them out. I took them out and put them back in the bag, almost right in front of her. I might as well have handed them to her."

"Now that's crazy," his father answered. "You had me drive back from the office to tell me this?"

"So now you're defending her?"

"No. I thought something serious had happened."

Anna looked at Clara desperately going through her things and she wondered how her mother's earrings could possibly have found themselves in the deep recesses of her father's drawers. As she struggled to keep an emotionless face, she saw Clara as if for the first time since she had entered their home.

In her maid's frilly uniform she looked like a teenage girl grotesquely put in a child's dress.

"Stop what you're doing," Anna's mother said and ordered Clara downstairs.

Anna followed Clara down to the sala. Clara was so small that when she sat on one of the chairs, her feet would not even touch the floor.

Her father wondered aloud whether they could have just been misplaced. Her mother snorted in disgust.

"Why don't we take her to the *barangay* hall, then," her father said. "Have her fill a blotter and maybe take a lie detector test."

To this her mother merely grunted. "Idiot. By that time, of course, the pearls would have been sold already." She added that since she had discovered their disappearance just a few short hours ago, no one had entered the house or exited it.

"In fact," she said, and so it was decided, "I'm sure the pearls will still be here. She's hidden them somewhere. That's their *modus operandi*."

Modus operandi was something Anna had never heard before.

"Pack up her things and bring them here," she told Anna. She didn't take her eyes off Clara while she spoke.

Anna counted her steps as she trudged back to Clara's room. She skipped the path and took pleasure in bringing up clods of grass and earth with her slippers. Anna found a bunch of garbage bags in the laundry area and entered Clara's room again. The closet doors swung freely now. Anna picked at the things on the floor. She thought of putting them all into one bag but decided to separate them into clothes, letters and magazines, and everything else.

In the sala she put the three black garbage bags by Clara's dangling feet. Clara swung her feet a little bit, as though she was actually being a little playful, or bored. There was nothing to do anyway until her mother spoke. Nobody spoke until her mother took her eyes away from Clara and looked at nothing in particular and told her to leave.

Clara stood up, feet dropping to the floor. She picked up the bags and walked out of the house and into the street.

"Those were good pearls, Dad," her mother said, like she was also speaking for Anna. "They were an investment."

"They were good pearls," he repeated as he disappeared into the kitchen. Anna saw him look at the cake from the night before on the kitchen table. He opened the fridge and crouched in front of it and seemed to consider its contents carefully.

“Anna, you go help your father in the kitchen. We’re all alone now so we’ll all need to help out. We need to sweep the house and sweep the grounds and look for those pearls.”

Her father entered the room before she could go to the kitchen. He exhaled loudly as he collapsed into the lounge chair. He had overfilled his glass and water spilled on the floor.

“Well, we all know what she’s going to end up,” her mother said.

In the silence that followed, Anna looked at her father until he answered: “A whore.”

Her mother went upstairs and her father lifted himself out of the chair and went back into the kitchen. Anna crept out and took the bike by the handlebars. It was evening already, but nobody seemed to notice her. The gate had been left open. It was quickly getting dark, but from the gate Anna could still see all the way into their living room and through the kitchen, right through the kitchen door screen into the torn-up grass in their backyard into Clara’s room.

She turned around and pushed forward and mounted the bike, pumping hard on the pedals as she went down the slope of the driveway, coasting as far as she could down the road on the momentum. When the bike began to slow down, Anna pedaled hard again, her knees and her elbows sticking out, until she was breathless with the effort.

There was Clara, already far ahead on the road, her garbage bags slung over her shoulder, walking quickly on the dark part of the shoulder, as though she were determined to go wherever she was going. The only time she ever went anywhere was on her day off, every other Sunday. She’d be up early on those days to serve them an early breakfast, dressed in her street clothes. It always startled Anna to her in face powder and lipstick, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, or sometimes a brightly printed blouse and a short skirt.

Anna pumped harder and pressed the button on the bicycle horn, filling the street with the police siren’s wail. Before Anna could correct her mistake, Clara had broken into a run and disappeared into the busy street.