

## WHAT THEY REMEMBER

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He had been gone for almost a year, but she would never admit to that. She would do a week's worth of his laundry every now and then, hang them out to dry, making sure the neighbors saw her fussing over his cotton shirts, his office slacks, his thick sweaters. He always did go on out of town trips, the office sending him to places as far as Davao and Dumaguete to visit the gas stations assigned to him, so it was a common occurrence for him to be gone for days, sometimes weeks at a time.

It was different before the accident. She used to cook elaborate dinners, sun-dried tomato pasta with olives and capers, roast beef, lamb chops. These she prepared as early as a few days before he arrived, back from inspecting the many franchises on his docket, making sure the stations were up to par, that the quota of gasoline orders were met, the pump boys in their proper uniform, each having completed their training before handling customers or the equipment.

These days, however, meals were single-serve, some bought off a *karinderia* after work; a steaming cup of rice to heat the already coagulating chop suey, or the fried chicken that had grown soggy during the post-lunch hour lull, each viand knotted in tiny, see-through plastic bags. Other times, when the lines were too long, or the lunch ladies too slow, and especially when she thought that their eyes judged her, tried to figure out why she was buying a take-out meal four days in a row, and pegging her as some lonely homebody, she would speed past Aling Banang's and hop onto the first jeepney headed toward home.

She would rush into her house and hastily pry open a can of pork and beans or tuna or vienna sausages, tilting her head back and forking the food directly into her mouth. She bought by the bulk because she needn't heat them before consumption. Sometimes her kitchen sink boasted of six or seven forks, each one slick with oil, before she could be bothered to wash them. A lone cup she hadn't rinsed out sat beside the water jug.

She would be in bed as early as seven-thirty in the evening. Usually she would read a book or watch some television, but no matter how drowsy she became, she would find herself unable to sleep. Sometimes, on the bad days, she would catch a movie on HBO, or a sitcom she found quite funny, and find herself still awake the second time it aired very early in the morning. No matter how little sleep she had, she would be awake at five-thirty, would shove her tiny feet into her husband's large, furry bedroom slippers and shuffle off to the bathroom for a quick shower.

Fashion these days, meant what color scrub suit would she wear today? She watched those television shows, shows that tracked down people stuck in a rut, wearing clothes that made them look too old, or too young, or too fat, or too cheap; once even, a handsome doctor, a surgeon, who practically lived in his scrubs, attended weddings, parties, even his own son's graduation in them, reasoning out that they fit well, were comfortable, and were low maintenance. She agreed with him. She still found the man handsome, even though his wife grudgingly admitted she was embarrassed to be seen with him. She could find nothing wrong with living in one's scrubs. It defined her as a person, as a professional.

She worked at a nursing home specializing in Alzheimer's disease and dementia, handling cases on a one-to-one basis, helping her charge in and out of bed, up and down the ramps or stairs, to the toilet, to the shower, with dressing, feeding, taking medication, and even in activities such as reading to them, letter-writing, watching television, or playing cards, mahjong, and Scrabble.

In her twelve years at Mount Cloud, she had worked with and lost seven patients, one lasting as long as five years with her, one not even making it past six months before succumbing to her illness. She didn't know what it was about the facility. It was a large compound in Cavite, was bright enough, had lots of space, lots of trees, had a lot of activities going on. But she still blamed the place for the rapid disintegration that took over anyone who came to stay. She felt sorry for these individuals who came to her in order to die, whose eyes didn't flicker in recognition at the sight of their loved ones; wondered if they had even the slightest idea of the fact that this was the road they were headed down, or that if they did, they could remind themselves to remember, to hold onto that specific memory.

In the last two years, she had been working with Tatay Fred, a fifty-three year-old retired scuba diving instructor whose son checked him in because he would go missing from their home only to be found in full scuba gear, sitting

in his boat, saying he was waiting for his student Monica, and that she was late, as usual. Since being committed to Mount Cloud, however, he refused any activity, disliking the walks he was goaded into taking, or the social hour he was required to attend daily. He would hold onto the railings on either side of his bed and shut his eyes, refusing to open them whenever she walked into his room.

Tatay Fred would only become animated whenever his son showed up, not really because of his visits but because of the things Marcus brought; a rare golden cowry Tatay Fred harvested illegally during one of his deep-sea diving trips; an old album containing pictures of Tatay Fred and his many students and colleagues; an electric blue starfish lazily moving about in a small aquarium; and once, his entire scuba gear, the skin suit, fins, mask, the octopus, regulator, and oxygen tank. When these were presented to him, Tatay Fred's eyes would light up. He would get out of bed and totter over to the large ottoman by the window, take whatever his son had brought in his hands and turn them over and over again in his fingers.

He would start talking, sometimes to no one in particular, at times addressing someone in the empty chair opposite his, *Itong* golden cowry, I went all the way to Samar for it. *Alam mo*, I can sell it on eBay, five hundred dollars, *minsán* higher, glow in the dark *kasi eh*.

On the day his gear was brought, he touched each piece of equipment, smiling, struggling a bit as he pulled the mask over his head, fitting the straps above his ears, pinching the nose pocket and saying, Monica, *huwag mong kalimutan*, pinch at the nose to release the air! Breathe through your mouth, steady breaths *lang*, *mauubos yung* oxygen, don't panic!



Sometimes at night, when she was about to fall asleep, she would forget that her husband was no longer there. She would jerk awake thinking she heard the bedroom door close softly, or the muffled flushing of the toilet, or how her husband used to slowly, carefully crawl into bed. Every night, she would prop pillows beside her, so that whenever she shifted in her sleep, or whenever she was in between sleeping and waking she could trick herself into thinking that there was a warm body lying down beside her.

Her feelings would pull her back and forth, depending on what little thing she remembered about him. The first few months, the memories would flood her brain involuntarily, images triggered to life by random actions . . ., how as she was stirring creamer into her morning coffee she would see a flash

of him tearing a packet of Coffee-mate open with his teeth, and get so irritated when the powder would sprinkle all over the dining table, knowing it didn't bother him and therefore it never occurred to him to clean up after himself . . . or how once, when she reached out through the shower curtain, she realized she had forgotten her towel in the bedroom, and how as she was hopping into her room sopping wet to retrieve it, she recalled their honeymoon with him sitting on their hotel bed laughing, having taken all the towels hostage as a prank. Upon seeing the towel she laid out folded neatly on the bed, she started crying, feeling foolish that the knowledge that he would never play tricks like that on her again had made her feel so sad.

Those visions had come to her naturally.

These days, however, she found herself deliberately walking into them, conjuring them up for fear that she would forget if she didn't. She would play his favorite songs, wear his pajamas however large they were on her, smoke his brand of cigarettes, read over his old love letters, walk past the restaurants they used to frequent, sometimes open his bottle of perfume that she still kept in her dresser drawer.

The fact that all her actions were lately so effortful made the rare moments of when he popped in her mind without notice all the more jarring. Like how as she was cleaning a drawer out she found his collection of ballpens. She had inadvertently started it for him after she had given him one she bought off a convenience store because it bore the logo of his favorite basketball team. She felt something like a punch to the gut. Despite her persistence about keeping their wedding portraits up on the walls, photographs she saw every day as she made her way to and from the house, bright smiles reminding her of how on the actual day of the wedding she at one point wanted to back out, something as small and stupid as plastic pens would hit her harder than the pictures ever could.



She had become used to the silence that Tatay Fred would retreat into whenever she entered his room, and so while he slept, she would play some of the CDs she found among his things, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, The Platters. Other times she would grab one of his books lined up in the shelf behind his bed and read to him, stopping only when he grunted in his sleep. Despite his protests, she would do bed turns every two hours, shifting his position in order to prevent ulcers from forming on his skin brought about by his stasis. She would tell him he needed exercise, help him into a wheelchair,

and push him around the grounds, following the winding pathways around the large garden surrounding their facility. She would park him underneath a shaded area near a man-made pond surrounded by a low enclosure, and he would stare at the murky water.

In one of their walks, Tatay Fred stood up and walked to the edge of the pond, and began speaking. *Si* Monica, *sobrang hinang* diver. Five dives *na, grabe pa rin mag-panic* when she's in the water. He shook his head. She's a good swimmer, passed all her tests, but still always runs out of oxygen during dives. She wouldn't answer, unsure of whether her replying would break this ease that came over him, allowing him to speak to her.

Since then, as though he never treated her with silence, he began telling her stories; usually about his diving school, about his adventures underwater, in the end always coming back to Monica. He went into so much detail about her, her hair that was so long that she refused to tie up causing it to fan around her face; hair that in the water looked like seaweed, or the tentacles of a jellyfish. Or how her skin never burned but reddened, how she was so white she almost glowed like a beacon.

Once when Marcus, his son, was visiting, she asked him while Tatay Fred was dozing, Is Monica your mother? Tatay Fred talks about her a lot. Marcus did not answer for a long while, he scratched at his chin and stared at his father. He sighed and finally shook his head, No, she's not.

She apologized. But what she really wanted to know was who Monica was that his father could not shut up about her?



Her husband used to be on the road so much that whenever he would return, it would take her a few hours to get used to having someone around. Perhaps the reason why she fussed so much with the cooking and the cleaning was because she didn't want to sit and think about what they were going to talk about, or how she was going to act around him.

He would usually enter the house and set his things by the door, a duffel bag full of laundry, a random gift from whatever region the head office sent him, *espasol* from Lucena, *uraro* from Laguna, *ube* jam from Baguio, *tupig* from Pangasinan, *silvanas* from Dumaguete, frozen durian from Davao. These little sweets they would eat after their meals, the papers, banana leaves, and colored cellophane wrappers littering the wooden dining table she had painstakingly polished with lemon-scented oil.

Meals were mostly silent. He would be exhausted from his trip and she would struggle with things to say. A few snippets of conversation would be attempted, How was Cebu? Oh, it was fine, it was the Sinulog Festival. I have never been to one of those. Well, you're welcome to join me next time. I'll file for a leave, then. I'll try to join you, but I might be away at the office a lot. Oh, I'm sure I'd find something to do while waiting. Hmmmm.

The conversation made with the fork and spoon, comprised of chewing and swallowing, of the clink of the glasses being lifted and set back down were more comfortable. They would allow the quiet to take over. After dinner, her husband would sit in front of the television, his socked feet propped up on a low coffee table, smoking while watching the news, always mindful of predicted oil price hikes published by the German Technical Cooperation. He was always on the lookout for how their brand was priced per gallon compared to the competition, on whether they or the rest of the Big Three increased prices first, cursing in that low voice of his whenever they looked bad to the consumers.

As soon as she finished clearing the kitchen out, she would join him in the living room, sitting primly on her side of the couch. She would nod as he watched the news, as though she agreed with everything the news anchor said. Once, when the program cut to a commercial, he told her that he would have to start traveling heavily, mapping through most of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. You mean, more than now? You're gone most of the week. He sighed and kicked at the throw pillow his feet were propped on. *Masyadong bumaba ang ROI ng mga Bulilit stations, eh.* I need to re-evaluate if it's worth keeping the smaller stations open. There are LPG stations in the province. *Tapos ang daming newer, larger stations; eh may CR, may service station, may convenience store, putang ina, may Jollibee at Chowking pa.*

"Oh, you'll be driving a lot?"

"Well, if I can, yes. I'm scheduled to fly to Visayas and Mindanao, *tapos* I'll have a car to go around in."

She turned back toward the television at hearing the finality of his words. She wanted to say so much. Like, if their company was really concerned with saving fuel and going green like what all their Go Clean Fuel marathons and commercials insisted, why did they have to waste so much gasoline driving and flying off to see how their efforts were doing? Or, wasn't there anyone else who could be sent off to do it? Or, did he even think about those things before accepting?



Her twelve-hour shift was from seven in the morning to seven in the evening, her night reliever for Tatay Fred a young, single girl named Ivy. They would usually run into each other to and from shifts and Ivy would talk non-stop about herself, her boy troubles, her credit card debt, her latest drunken spree. Whenever they would part, Ivy would ask, How's Lito? Oh. Her face would drain at the question. He's somewhere in Itogon.

Travelling *pa rin, huh?* Well, you're lucky, he always buys you presents when he gets back. *Buti ka pa!*

She would avoid Ivy's gaze, smile and nod, grabbing Tatay Fred's chart and fussing over it more than was necessary.

She used to bring whatever was left of her husband's presents to share with her coworkers. Once, Ivy teased her about no longer bringing her desserts. So she was forced to commute to Market! Market! to shop for different delicacies from all over the Philippines, VJANDEP *pastels* from Camiguin one week, Cheding Peanuts from Iligan the next. She never partook of them after choking on the sweetness of the *yema* in the *pastels*, the taste insistent even after she drank several glasses of water. Whenever her friends asked her to have dinner after their shift or to catch a movie with them, she would beg off, always promising to join next time. At some point, they stopped asking, or when they did, became less persuasive in their efforts.

Once, as she was charting at the nursing station, just as she was about to leave at the end of her shift, Marcus walked into Tatay Fred's room with a woman following in his footsteps, her floral dress reaching down past her knees, her shoes sensible and flat, her wide feet straining the tensile strength of the leather. Marcus brought a heavy basket of coconuts, pineapples, mangos, and bananas, Tatay Fred's favorite fruits. In the woman's small hands was a picture frame that seemed to once have been lined in velvet, the deep purple texture now dull as though having gone through several exposures to oil or water; on her finger a ring unmistakably a wedding band. 'Tay, I'm here with 'Nay, Marcus said, setting the basket down and then urging his mother toward the bed.

The woman smiled and hesitated before laying a hand on top of Tatay Fred's. He looked up at her before snatching his hand back. *Sino ka?* The woman's smile faltered before resurging all the brighter, the drop of her lips almost imperceptible, like the blinking of a light bulb. Freddy, *kumusta?*

He didn't answer and so she pressed on, Marcus came for me, *alam mo naman* I can't leave the resort just like that. Oh, I have something for

you. She set the picture frame beside his bed, a colored photograph of them dancing during their wedding, his arms around her waist, her head resting on his shoulder, one hand wrapped around his back, the other at her hip, intertwined with his.

Tatay Fred looked at the picture before he knocked it onto the floor, swiping at the side table over and over again until he succeeded in pushing off the rest of the items on top as well—bottles of pills, a vial of alcohol, gauze, micropore tape, and cotton flying everywhere. *Ano ba? Bakit niyo ba ako niloloko?* I don't know who you are, you are not my family!

At the sound of Tatay Fred's voice, she dropped her work and rushed into his room, ushering Marcus and his mother out before calming her patient down. When Tatay Fred had settled back in bed, listening to his music and clapping along to the beat, she walked back out to the visitor's lounge and asked them, What happened?

Marcus had a protective arm around his mother, patting her back rhythmically. He scowled and turned away, as though she were to blame for his father's reaction. Finally, his mother spoke up, the picture frame in her hands, the stand slightly cracked. I didn't want Freddy to come here. *Kaya naman ako pumayag sa desisyon ni Marcus na dalhin na si Freddy dito e, minsan,* we'd be talking or he would be sleeping, he would look at me and he wouldn't know who I was. He chased me around the resort with a knife once, asking me where was I keeping Monica? Can you believe it? Twenty-seven years of marriage, and it's Monica he's asking for.



Lito was away in Sorsogon when she found out she was pregnant. What she mistook for a bout of flu that had been going around the clinic was actually her body going through the changes expected in pregnancy, the increase in hCG and estrogen hormones, the enhanced sense and sensitivity to smells, things she memorized in nursing school but never fully understood until then. She was in the waiting area at the OB Gyn when she finally mustered up the courage to call her husband.

Hey, do you have a minute? Why? I have something to tell you. He sighed impatiently, Can it wait? *May rally dito sa Bulan,* jeepney drivers parked around the gasoline station and left them there, *nakaharang sa daan,* no one can enter or leave. *Putang ina,* what a mess! Oh, okay. *Ano ba yan,* is it important? The secretary signaled that it was her turn and she whispered



into the phone, no, it can wait. When are you coming home? Sa Friday, see you, hon.

She kept her secret for three days, smiling as she made dinner or did her duties at work, thankful for the fact that Tatay Fred had retained his slim physique that the bed turns and transfers were not too difficult for her to manage. The night before her husband was due to come home, she marinated an array of chicken, beef, and mutton in a mixture of soy sauce, rice wine, peanut butter, and lemon; adding minced peppers, ginger, garlic, and cilantro. She had cooked satay for Lito one time, and he had been raving about it ever since. She tried to imagine how he would feel, what he would look like at her news, excited to finally have a guaranteed piece of him with her always, despite his numerous travels.

At work, all she could think about was what sex the baby would be, or who it would look like, wishing it Lito's height and sharp nose, her dimples and the shape of her fingers and toes. She ducked out of Tatay Fred's room as he was sleeping, feeling a wave of nausea and running for her thermos of watermelon-lemon juice she kept chilled in the staff kitchen, something she had been craving the past few days that oddly calmed the churning of her stomach. When she returned to his room, he was missing, the side rail of his hospital bed lowered, the thin sheet she had fitted around his sleeping figure now in a bundle on the floor.

She rushed out of the room, peering into each of the doorways she passed, her heart thudding in her ears, her eyes brimming over as she cursed herself for being so careless as to leave without endorsing him to one of the idle nurses at the station. She had covered the entire floor without catching any sign of him, the halls unusually quiet. In her shock, she found herself wandering back to his room, noticing the open closet for the first time, seeing the golden cowry and the picture albums, but not the scuba diving gear.

She raced to the manmade pond, seeing Tatay Fred's robe strewn on the grass. She surveyed the water, looking for some sign of disturbance, finally noting faint ripples coming from beneath the surface. Without thinking, she jumped in, the loose material of her scrubs billowing and filling up with water, her thin cardigan feeling heavier and heavier across her back and arms as it grew sopping wet. She surfaced more than once to determine where Tatay Fred was, gasping for air. She had never been a strong swimmer, her limbs starting to feel heavy. She thrashed around in the cold, her breath flowing out of her mouth in strong bursts, her throat burning up as her body caused her to reflexively inhale. She awoke to find herself in an empty room, Tatay

Fred standing over her, still in his wetsuit. Monica, *sabi ko sa iyo eh*, stay close, buddy system!

Lito arrived at the facility a few hours later. He dropped his bag and a plastic full of *pili* tarts onto the floor. I was on the road when Ivy called me. She said you had drowned but that a patient rescued you. After they found you and revived you, cleaned you up, they noticed there was some clotting. Honey, she said you were pregnant, and that she did not know if you knew. He touched her hair, pushing wisps of it aside. She turned away.

She returned to work immediately after her miscarriage, refusing to talk about what happened, waiving the leave she was offered. She forgot to cook and clean, taking long naps when she got home. Lito tried for months to make up for the fact that he wasn't there for her, asked to be assigned to stations within the city, and patiently dealt with her grief. He tried over and over again to tell her how sorry he was that he didn't talk to her when she called to tell him of her pregnancy, that they had lost their child. She would stand up and walk out of the room whenever he approached her. She would refuse the modest meals he would cook for the both of them, couldn't stand having him touch her, would get up and out of bed every time he tried putting his arms around her while they slept.

One day, when she got home from work, she immediately noticed how clean the house was, how the trash had been disposed of, the dishes washed and dried, the laundry done, the bed fixed. Sitting at the dining table was her husband, a pot of stew and two bowls in front of him. Please sit with me and eat, he said quietly. She complied and they ate in silence.

How are you, he asked. She hesitated, not knowing how to answer him. She started talking about Tatay Fred, about how he seemed to be making progress with a new drug Aricept, how he was more relaxed and alert. Please don't, he interrupted, I don't want to know about how work is. She opened her mouth in attempt to speak, closed it when no words readily came out. She dropped her spoon onto the bowl with a clatter. I don't know. You don't know how you're doing? No, I don't know how to talk to you anymore. I'm trying, but I don't remember.

The next day, after work, she came home to find his car and his duffel bag gone. She expected it. That was what she remembered of him.



She remembers clearly how things were. Sometimes, she is afraid that it will be the thing about him that she will never forget. He used to nag her

about having children, telling her they were nearing forty and he was really envious of his friends who were on their second or third child. At night, Lito would be waiting for her, then still working at the head office in Pasig and usually home at roughly the same time as her. He had been researching nonstop on ways to increase the probability of conception, every dinner discussing some technique he read off the internet, or relaying advice from his female coworkers.

She felt slightly mortified at how he began to approach sex scientifically, methodically, charting her monthly period in a calendar, or testing her cervical mucus with his fingers; stretching the cloudy, viscous liquid over and over again between his thumb and pointer finger to tell whether she was ovulating, a slight furrow between his brows. How he took her basal body temperature in the mornings, gently nudging her awake before commanding her to say “ah,” a basal thermometer in hand. How when he determined she was fertile he would then begin kissing her on the ear, knowing it was the quickest way to arouse her, all the while repeatedly whispering, it’s okay to be a little late today. After making love, he would insist she keep her legs up for ten to fifteen minutes, setting a timer beside her and fussing over her as she lay there in bed, stroking her hair and smiling down at her.

She was hesitant, although she never spoke of it, unable to shake the thought of how one of her colleagues had gotten pregnant and started acting out of the ordinary. She would laugh or cry or throw a temper tantrum for seemingly no reason at all; one time locking a patient inside his room and refusing to let him out because he did not finish his vegetables, another crying for three hours straight because she said she never saw anybody visit the woman who was in room number 17, yet another coming to work in the middle of the afternoon in her pajamas, her distended belly straining the material of the pajama top, the buttons misaligned. She spoke of how she woke up and cleaned her entire house, only rushing off to work when she remembered it was a Monday. Although aware that pregnancy normally resulted in some hormonal and psychological changes, she was alarmed when her colleague seemed to fare worse and worse as she grew larger, how she quit her job in a fit of rage over a misplaced chart and stayed at home ever since.

Lito seemed to become more and more desperate as time passed without any success, disappointed when another month saw her reaching into the closet and pulling a packet of sanitary pads out. He began making side trips to the grocery; forcing her to eat plenty of fruit for breakfast; buying a wide array of vegetables, carrots, pumpkin, beans, and peas; banning beef and

pork, and purchasing white meat instead; limiting her salt and sugar intake; making her snack on yogurt even though he knew she disliked its sour taste; and asking her to quit her three cups of coffee a day and pleading with her to drink milk in the morning instead. He mentioned the possibility of meeting with fertility doctors and carefully asked her if she thought it was a good idea.

One night, she came home from work excited to tell him that her friend visited the office with her newborn, how she was so happy with her baby and that it was the cutest little boy she had ever seen. She found him sitting at her side of the closet, clothes strewn on the floor, an old purse she kept hidden beneath a pile of shirts turned inside-out, a half-empty packet of birth control pills in his hands.



This is the story of Monica. When Tatay Fred was twenty, he fell in love with this girl who vacationed in Subic during the summer. He had seen her over the last few summer breaks; her father owned a house near his family's resort Scuba Haven. She was a sullen kind of girl, beautiful and quiet, did everything in a half-hearted, sloppy manner a girl of sixteen would typically do. She listened to rock and roll and made fun of Fred's way of speaking to her, broken bits of English he acquired through years of working with the foreigners he taught how to dive. Her father had signed her up for early morning private lessons, wanting her to do something besides sitting at home and sulking.

Fred would be up by four o'clock in the morning, would check and recheck all the equipment, would pace back and forth outside their gate, kicking up mounds of sand that allowed him to measure time by the depth of the trench his restless movements created since he never wore a watch. She would always be late for their appointed five-thirty schedule, would refuse to tie her hair, or remove her assortment of rings and bracelets, even when they started to tarnish in the salt water. She would be wearing the same diving suit everyday, the Lycra clinging to her boyish frame. She would hardly listen to Fred, rolled her eyes at his instructions and kept her Walkman turned up even as he briefed her at the start of each dive.

There were plenty of wreck dive sites near the resort. Fred would power up the small speedboat Scuba Haven I and maneuver the craft to San Quentin, or El Capitan, leaving his assistant, Joey, the son of the resort cook whom he had practically raised, to man the boat while they would dive into and around the ships turned over on their sides, covering the expanse of their rusted hulls.

She had one of those plastic underwater Kodak cameras she took with her and would try to enter the vessels, taking pictures of the ship, the plankton, the different kinds of fish. She would leave the film with him soon as she used them up, making him drop them off and pick them up at the nearby photo centers.

She knew he was smitten with her, would keep him dangling, hoping, bumbling desperately for her attention. He would ask her at the end of each dive, Monica, *may* plans *ka na ba* for dinner? She would hedge and say, why? And he would redden and mumble his invitation to dine with him in one of the nearby restaurants. She would say maybe, or yes, but would always send her *yaya* out with a flimsy excuse of a stomachache, or a migraine, or how she wasn't hungry. However, whenever they were underwater, she would tease him with her touch, would swim so close to him that her untied hair would caress the skin of his arm, or his neck, or the side of his face. Or she would disappear from view even when he had explicitly reminded her at the start of every dive to be within range so that he could come to her whenever she needed assistance, and then would pop out of nowhere laughing so hysterically that she often ran out of oxygen.

At the end of that summer, just as she had a week's worth of time left before she had to leave, he got into an argument with her. They had scheduled to go to the site of the *USS New York*, an 8,150-ton armored cruiser some 87 feet, underwater. It would be one of the deepest dives Monica would have to make, and he reminded her to regulate her breathing, to stay within eyesight. She cracked her gum at his words and said, yeahyeahyeahyeah, but just as he was cutting the engine of their boat, she hit the water without warning. A few seconds after, a bunch of her bracelets floated up from where she had landed.

Fred dove into the water, circling the wreck over and over again, checking under the portside and around the upper and lower decks, trying not to panic when his Submersible Pressure Gauge indicated he was low on oxygen, resurfacing only when he was all but depleted. There she was, sitting in the boat, laughing with her arms around Joey, preventing him from diving down and alerting Fred that she was safe. Gotcha, didn't I, she said, giggling, her bracelets back around her wrist. Fred climbed aboard the boat and drove home, and refused to speak to Monica even when she hung out in their resort, even when on her last day, she dropped off an envelope full of underwater snapshots, the majority of them photos of him.

She didn't return the summer after, or the next, probably off to college and then real life. But all these he remembered, recreated even to the smallest detail, the number of friendship bracelets encircling her thin wrist, the color of her eyes, the smell of her sun block, the softness of her hair at his fingertips; all these he recounted to whomever would listen, to the empty ottoman opposite him, even to his wife who nodded patiently, as though she had never heard the story before.

On her way home one time, she ran into his wife outside, the older woman smoking a cigarette, shaking as she dragged deeply, her sunken cheeks sucking in. She smiled in greeting but stopped and turned back, asked, how do you do it, listen to him speak of someone else? *We* used to talk all the time. Lately, he doesn't even look at me anymore. *Swerte na ako* whenever he talks to me. The woman dropped the butt onto the grass and ground it up under her shoe before walking back into the building.

She stood there by the pond, not having stopped by it since her accident, possibly, unconsciously avoiding the place, always walking past when she took Tatay Fred around in his wheelchair, and stopping lately by a huge fountain instead. She stared at the water, at how dead leaves from the trees collected at the edges, at how it was unmoving; wondering if at nine weeks pregnant, her child had felt the panic she did when she had swallowed so much water, or if it, too, like her, was overcome by this calm just as she passed out, suspended just beneath the surface.

She was surprised to feel tears on her cheeks, not having cried in almost a year. She stared at her reflection, at how she had become pale, thin, and unrecognizable; her hair slack, her neon green scrubs drowning out her shape and color. She fished for her cellular phone, scrolled through her contacts, and stopped at Lito's name. She opened a new message and stared at the screen, at the blinking cursor.