Kilometer Zero

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Tonight the air is chilly, occasioned by drizzle.

Scott and I, we are in a Chinese hole-in-the-wall near his apartment in Ermita, and our dimsum and noodles, freshly arrived, crowd our table. We find ourselves talking about Kilometer Zero, the kind of distances not measured in miles. "It tells you," he says, breaking the disposable chopsticks apart, "this is where everything originates, the alpha. We all know it's arbitrary, sure! We have no illusions about that. But we also know it's not *that* random."

He picks up a thin slab of duck from his plate.

"You," he turns to me, chewing, "you know where your Kilometer Zero is?"

"Mine as a person, or the Philippines?"

"Ha!" from his nasal cavity comes a strange, watery sound. "Good one."

Outside, the busy sidewalk is lit by a row of street lamps, the seal of the city government outlined in the iron curlicues, their little roofs emblazoned with the logo of a fast-food joint. The aging wooden apartments across the restaurant, I imagine, bustle with various day-ending activities, unseen and silent.

Scott continues. "So even if Makati is the financial epicenter, Manila will always be the country's soul, you know. Why? I'll tell you why. Because Lu-ney-tah is where Rizal was shot. Because Roxas Boulevard used to be Dewey Boulevard, after that admiral who drove away the Spaniards in Manila Bay. Because Manila traded with Acapulco. And what's Makati? A bunch of refurbished runways and sterile high-rises."

I semi-nod and take a sip of the house tea.

"*Di ba?*" he asks, and the lukewarm, earthy liquid almost shoots up my nose.

"Three years here and the extent of your Tagalog is amazing," I say.

"I've always liked being responsible for that Cheshire cat grin on your face."

His free hand shifts across the sticky table and turns to rest ever so slightly against my little finger, which twitches at contact. I look at him, shaking my head.

The hand, ashamed, retreats. Scott's shy smile is also his sweetest, his most naked. I smile at the attempt at trespass. In the next table, a famous comedienne whose main shtick is her hilarious Imelda Marcos impressions, eats in silence, her hair for a change sheen-less, flat against her scalp.

"Just trying, Alvin," Scott says. "Can't blame a guy for tryin'."

The restaurant is narrow, too brightly lit, with unsmiling waiters, sticky soy sauce droppers, and tables that are always barely wet with the last customer's noodle broth. The excellent food, they say, allows for this sloppiness, the inadequacies excused as "character." There, too, are a lot of objectionable things about Scott. He can be self-centered. He lacks focus. He's notoriously unreliable. He also happens to be a leading scholar on contemporary placelessness—if that is even a real area of study—who now subsists on American taxpayers' money. Poems for dimes. I suppose that's a fair exchange. Conference papers for dollars.

"What's the opposite of Kilometer Zero?" I ask. "Like the most far-flung province?"

"Wait, wait, no. No. You haven't been listening, Alvin. Jesus." He takes a gulp of lukewarm Coke. "What I have been telling you is, the Kilometer Zero of the contemporary city has *nothing* to do with distance. Jesus."

His plate of rice—about two fistfuls when we began—is almost empty; in its wake, dark-brown swirls of the *asado* sauce.

I continue chewing.

His green eyes suddenly widen. He sinks back on to his chair, crossing his pale, skinny arms across his chest. He begins to chuckle, complete with the heartfelt shaking of shoulders that supposedly intimates his carefree "man of the world" aplomb. To me and probably the rest of the customers within earshot, it is creepy, this Dracula laugh. Parking his chopsticks on his plate, he sweeps his unruly blond hair with his palm. "We are the city!"

"What?"

"We are the city! What is a city without inhabitants? You see? Nothing but plains and hills and rivers. Look at me. I've been living in Manila for three

years. I won't feel at home in Seattle if I return. I will probably *not* return, to be perfectly honest. You see? The city is not a place. It is people. It is us. A city ends when there are no longer people to animate it."

I look at him the way a father eyes his most needy child. "There are 11 million people in Manila, Scott."

"Yes! We are its avenues. Its waterways. Its forgotten alleys. People breathe life into the city. You, and I, and the—" he clips a shrimp dumpling and puts it in his mouth, "the lovely person who steamed this remarkable plate of dimsum. Very good, by the way. Very good."

"The best in town."

He smiles then quickly turns serious. "But think about it. Long after you die, the MRT's going to keep running. It will continue to ferry passengers from North Avenue to Taft day in and day out. They will replace the coaches, the guards, the tickets, the signages. But that operation, the anonymous mass of people, that *organism*, if you will, will outlive you and me."

Satisfied, Scott crosses his thin legs, waiting, I surmise, for applause.

Scott obviously hasn't been to Divisoria during Christmas season or Baclaran on a Wednesday after mass. His pronouncements need not be said there; they just brush against your arm and breathe down your cheek, snatch your favorite bag and scatter away, engulfed, then and forever, by the murmuring crowd.

"Where's Ian?" I change the subject.

"In Min-de-nao. Somewhere. I don't know, Alvin. You know how he is. Always saving the world somewhere."

Ian, Scott's boyfriend, is in the Peace Corps. I've always been curious how that works, how Scott and his smirking cynicism can sleep in the same bed with Ian and his clear-headed messianic complex. I suppose that they were born in the same country—in the same coast, even, Seattle being just three scenic train rides away from Flagstaff—overrides some of the differences.

Imelda signals for her bill. She looks over at our table, looks at Scott, who quickly smiles. She then looks at me, in her face remnants of the for-Caucasians-only grin.

DAYS LATER, I find anti-Kilometer Zero.

In this place, it's always dim. Even at the height of noon, such as now, when the city's corrugated iron roofs smolder and the asphalt in EDSA heaves

desert-like, it is content to unfold in shadows. And when night comes, and 500-watt yellow spotlights are turned on to light the way of passing buses, it remains, at best, enveloped in a sallow hue, unable to fight the night's relentless diminishing.

In this busy corner of Shaw Boulevard and EDSA, the bus where I'm on now idles, awaiting the traffic light's yellow-to-green blink. What a place: aboveground but buried in the concrete of a flyover and a train station; along the route of a thousand vehicles but neglected. Imagine standing right in the middle of that center island waiting for a chance to cross. Around you, the continuous haze and heat of cars and people desperately trying to cover their noses. Look up and it's the underside of the train station, that forgotten space amid the giant pillars that quiver at every train's approach. Out of rain's reach and virtually airless, inches-thick dust must have gathered there over the years. The black of coal, like the fumes that swirl almost solidly in EDSA. Like the tissues that line a smoker's lungs.

I can almost hear Scott's excited retort. "Ah, so you see that's a spot people try to avoid at all costs. The warmth there is the heat of engines, of Saudi fuel. Of machine! It is not human warmth. The city is us. The city is a harried commuter trying to get home after a long day in his three-square-meter cubicle in Makati. You're so overworked—"

At least in my mind I can shut him up.

We have seen less and less of each other since I started working the graveyard shift for a call center two years ago. My last job was for a fledgling *Village Voice*-type broadsheet, and we used to see each other more. My office then, to which I reported every Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday to put the weekend issue to bed, was on Padre Faura. Scott and I would have a drink at least twice a week, mostly in kitschy Providence in Vito Cruz, where we met on his first night in Manila.

The light turns green; with some effort, the bus escapes from that cavernous underbelly. It exhales as it speeds out, like the passengers who are happy to emerge from the gridlock. It zooms to the open highway; the sky is visible and blue. It soon stops by the fenced loading area in front of Megamall, where waiting people under umbrellas amble toward the door of the bus that hisses open. One by one, they appear on the bus's aisle, heads turning in search of a vacant seat. Someone takes the empty half of my two-seater. I scoot an inch or two closer to the window, rearrange the knapsack on my lap, and peel my eyes back outside.

The bus has climbed Ortigas flyover when I realize I have gotten on the wrong bus, again. Normally, I get off in front of Galleria, then take a G-Liner bus to my house in San Juan. Some buses, differentiated by an extra word on the signage, take this flyover, skipping Galleria altogether. Those I ought not to take. When this happens, I get off at Cubao, then take the train to J. Ruiz, then walk to my house.

I don't mind the detour, even if it entails some few more minutes of walking under the noonday sun. Sometimes I even suspect I take the wrong bus intentionally, bored with the routine that for the past two years has dictated my way home. In any case, I always arrive home to the same comforting scene: the smell of lunch, and my agile mother arranging plates and silverware on the table, while on her free arm sits one-year-old Sophia, my sister Marie's firstborn.

That afternoon, I come home to an empty house.

"WENT TO THE hospital, Sophia at Tita Fe's," offers the beautiful cursive on the note atop the center table, written on a ripped notebook page weighed in place by a glum-looking Fuji apple. Mama used to work as a stenographer. The crunch of the fruit follows me to the dining table, where a bowl of still-warm *sinigang*, tamarind-spiked soup with pork and greens, once uncovered, piques the air.

Our next door neighbor Tita Fe, a widow in her fifties, arrives while I am waiting for the rice cooker's red light to turn green, like a household traffic light. Sophia is in her arms, asleep. I whisper my thanks and offer her some soup, which she refuses. Gently, she puts Pia on the sofa and motions to leave, but not before asking if anything's wrong with Mama. She seems a little out of sorts lately, she says. I tell her I'm not sure, but I will ask.

My mother's arrival is announced by the metallic creak of the gate.

"Tita Fe's wondering if you're OK," I say when she sits down.

"Is she?"

"Are you?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I? Marie hasn't called. It's been three months since the last time."

"Want me to call her?"

The pork is chewy—the cubes of fat jelly-like in consistency—although the string beans are a fraction undercooked, rigid to the bite.

"*Ang sarap*," I say. The food is delicious.

"Thank you, Vin."

I'm used to my mother's excessive gratitude, the result of a devout life, of unsaid prayers actually getting granted, naturally, as if it were God himself who ceremoniously cherry-picks the things that weigh on her shoulders. My father, who had worked as a grocer in Kuwait for fifteen years then went home penniless and with a drinking problem, died of liver cirrhosis a year later. Our landlord, who found little difference between a normal due date and one when Papa just died, or a normal living room and one with a white wooden casket in place of the sofa, died of a heart attack the same morning we buried Papa in Loyola.

In the now coffin-less living room, two o'clock sunlight seeps through the translucent fabric of the orange curtains; Sophia stirs, bathing in the muted glow. In the dining area, where we are, the light is artificial, from a round fabric-lined mini-chandelier attached to a ceiling fan, whose humming blades turn with some effort, burdened by age.

"Have a good sleep, Vin," she says, when I get up from my seat.

My bed, to which I collapse after splashing water on my face and stripping to my boxers, is a double. My room is a cocoon that I try to protect from all light, covering all the gaps and slits where its unwanted rays could announce the time of day. About the afternoon humidity, there is only so much the weak whirring of the electric fan can do. Warm air in, warm breeze out. I set my phone's alarm at 9 p.m. The alarm tune is called "Early Riser."

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, Ate Marie comes for a visit. She brings grilled chicken, fresh *lumpia*, *relyenong bangus*, and, for dessert, *ube halaya*. I was supposed to meet Scott before work, but I told him my sister had shown up at the door with a feast of guilty supplications.

"Hey, why don't I come over?" he said on the phone. "Say hello to Mama and Ate?"

"That's not going to happen, Scott."

"I know where you live, Alvin. Just saying."

Once, at midnight, he showed up at my doorstep drunk, hours after a big fight. "Alvin!" Mama's voice, hushed in its urgency, filled my room. "There's a Kano downstairs looking for you! Should I call Tito Jimmy? What is this? What did you do?"

My chest had thumped at the prospect of my life's waters—terribly compartmentalized until then—overflowing from their unsteady basins and meeting: my mother's calm lake, in this instance, and Scott's raging river. I went to the door right away to prevent any further spillage, but the series of events had been quick. Ten minutes or so hence, Scott, my mother, and Marie were having coffee in our living room, while I was sent to a nearby 7-Eleven to buy *ensaymada* for our suddenly sober and charming guest. That talk with my mother extended my relationship with Scott for another two months, mostly because I was reeling from the surprise outing.

Sophia has a ready smile for her errant mother now, although that baby musters the same cheer at the sight of the nice, old Ilocano woman from whose cart Mama gets her vegetables every morning.

"How's work?" Ate Marie asks, scooping a hefty spoonful of minced bamboo shoots swimming in golden peanut sauce.

"It's OK," I say. "Nothing exciting."

"He doesn't get enough sleep," Mama says.

Ate Marie shrugs, "Well, if it pays the bills—"

"Yeah," I say.

"Sophia!" my sister cries.

My niece, who is on her mother's lap, just knocked over her plastic feeding cup, spilling water on the table. Ate Marie pushes her chair backward to avoid the cascade of water. She pulls a wad of tissue and proceeds to wipe the table, then Sophia's knees, her lap. Dinner is stalled as she does this; Mama is immobilized, no longer used to commotions that she doesn't handle herself. "So, what have you been doing lately, Marie?"

"Well, last month I got a job in Pagudpud."

"That sounds nice. What kind of job?"

"I'm a receptionist at a resort."

"Care to give us a free night's stay?" I ask.

"Alvin!" Mama says.

"I can probably work something out," Ate Marie says, grabbing Sophia's right hand just before it topples the bowl of gravy. "Let me know if you're going. Are you still together with that white guy? I'm sure he'll feel right at—"

Mama looks at my sister. "Marie!"

"What?"

"That white guy has a name," Mama says, before turning to me, "Steve, right?"

"Scott. We're no longer together. That was a long time ago."

"Oh yeah, Scott," Ate Marie says, looking pleased. "Nice guy. Smart. Booming voice. Why couldn't you make it work with him, Alvin? A green card sounds—"

"Ate," I say, in meek protest.

I arrange a mound of relyenong bangus on my plate, mix it with rice. Sophia looks at what I'm doing, transfixed. I look at her and grin. She sniggers. At once I realize this is the height of her joy, when language is just verging on articulation and, therefore, kind to her.

A smile means joy. A frown means sadness.

This is Scott, a year ago: "I love you." Clarity's violence. "But, you know, the future we had prepared for, that we saw with a singular vision, I have forgotten its shape. I no longer need it."

"Do you need help with the expenses here?" my sister asks now. "I don't earn much, but I suppose—"

"We're OK, Marie," Mama answers for us.

I stand up to get the bottle of ketchup from the fridge.

"Alvin," my sister says, "if you want to say something—"

"What?"

Silence, again, punctuated by the sound of chewing, the clink of cutlery on ceramic.

"Just a couple more years," she says, "and then I will take Sophia out of your hands, OK? I promise. I just need to fix a few things in my life. Maybe I can get you guys some help around here?"

Sophia fidgets, tries to break free from my sister's lap, from the warm prison of Marie's tanned, shapely arms. Mama smiles, to make light of this, our only situation.

Marie and I, we have very few things in common.

"I didn't want to ask Ma," she tells me as we walk to the main road where she can take a cab. "But has Ed ever shown up?"

"No, Ate."

"Well, I've been getting calls. It's why I went to Pagudpud. Too bad Tito Jimmy's dead."

"Maybe instead of a maid you should get us security."

"If something happens to any of you," she says, "I will not forgive myself."

"Ate," I say, slowing down, "don't you get lonely?"

"What?"

"Moving from one place to another, meeting people then saying goodbye to them. Being, you know, placeless."

"Placeless?"

"It's this thing of Scott's. Lately I've been—"

"Alvin," she cuts me off, her hand raising to alert a passing cab, "listen to what I will say, OK? Are you listening? OK. Until you've worked as a toll booth operator in the middle of SLEX at 3 in the morning, you don't know—you have absolutely no clue—how it feels to be lonely."

The dust-white cab stops; my sister disappears into the backseat. I am hoping that she will look back or at least wave dismissively, but she doesn't.

WHEN MY SISTER leaves, I debate on whether to sleep for one more hour before preparing for work, or just stay up and maybe watch some television, finish what is left of the ube. After putting Sophia to bed, my mother turns on the radio and plays her favorite ABBA Greatest Hits disc at full volume.

"What's wrong, Ma?" I ask, joining her at the kitchen where she is washing the dishes.

She gives me her standard meek look, which she always wears in preparation for serious talk. "Why is your Ate like that, Vin?"

My laughter may have reached the bedroom, where Sophia is asleep.

"*O*, what's funny?" she asks, genuinely perplexed.

"Sorry. What do you mean?"

"Why can't she stay put?

"Ma," I put my hand on her shoulder, "you and I know the reason why she can't *stay put*."

"Even before Ed, I mean, she had always been like this. Remember when your Papa died, she didn't stay home. She went to school then stayed over at her classmate's house for two weeks. Now we see her four, five times a year."

On the television, a weather report. Tomorrow's going to be "dry, dry, dry," except in the early evening, when the tail end of a cold front might bring some scattered thunderstorms in Southern Luzon, including Metro Manila. Blame Siberia, the weathergirl quips.

"The storm is within us! Rages within us," I hear Scott in my head.

The last time she visited, Ate Marie was working as a waitress in a seaside resto-bar in Bacolod. Before that, she was a tour guide in Banaue; before that, a tour operator for a rafting company in Cagayan de Oro. I'm not sure if there's a connection between those jobs, a series of events where one thing had led to another. I'm also not sure how or where to begin asking. Her life seems to be a Pandora's box of uneasy revelations; it is better for everyone if things just stayed inside.

When she was pregnant with Sophia, a knock at our gate at 2 in the morning had stirred the entire house into a mute panic. From my mother's room, I could hear the voices of two men by our doorstep. Outside, Mama said, two more stood beside an owner-type jeep with the engine still running.

We had known it was coming. Tita Fe's husband Tito Jimmy, an army reservist, answered our door.

"Good morning *po*," one of the men had said, casually, politely. "If it isn't too much of a bother, we'd like to talk to her."

By "her," he meant my sister, who was with me in the room, her hand resting atop the swell in her midsection. She would tell us months later, during a rare *noche buena* dinner on Christmas Eve, that she had a kitchen knife within reach, atop the side table, behind a picture frame coddling a yellowing Polaroid of Papa smirking in a *barong*, standing under a church portico.

"Please leave," Tito Jimmy said.

The men chuckled.

"Sir," the same man said, seemingly amused by the discrepancy between Tito Jimmy's wanton courage and greying hair, slight build. "We don't want any arguments. Ed is still in the hospital because of what she did. Poor guy. No more kids in his future, can you imagine? Look. We just want a few words with her. Ask her why she did it. Maybe scare her a little. *Sige na, pare*. We're all adults here."

"Go," Tito Jimmy repeated. "And don't come back."

Tito Jimmy firmly shut the door in the man's face, and the house, for a second, was so still and quiet that I heard a singular creak in the floor. My sister shifted her weight in preparation, it seemed to me, for an attack. A swift kick on the door from the outside rattled the house and us and Tito Jimmy, who took a step back and quickly took hold of the unseen firearm inside his army jacket. My mother let out a shriek, before making the sign of the cross, her hands atremble.

The silence that followed might have lasted anywhere between ten seconds and ten minutes. I never could tell. We all heaved a sigh of relief when the jeep's engine roared then faded into the night. The idea of a family, it was never clear to me until then, in that darkened sala, hushed except for the dependable sound of crickets. That was the last time I touched my sister, in an awkward half-embrace while clutching Mama's still-shaking arms.

"I'm worried about your sister," my mother tells me now.

"Ma." I smile weakly, to put forth my earnestness. "She can take care of herself. She always has."

"I'm also worried about Sophia. I'm surprised Ed hasn't come over to, you know, do something. Maybe we should think about moving."

"It's Ate he wants. I think he's made it clear that he doesn't want anything to do with Pia."

"Yes, but what if he realizes she's an effective way to get back at Marie?"

I think I'll try to sleep for a bit, I tell her. I have an hour to spare.

THE FIRST NOTES of the alarm startle my room, the ruffled sheets still warm with sleep. The house is still. I go to the sala and turn on the TV, and the new light bounces around the tiled floor, my and Ate's framed graduation photos on the wall, the row of ceramic angel figurines on a shelf.

Onscreen, Conan O'Brien is talking to a photo of George W. Bush on a TV monitor, whose mouth area is crudely replaced by real, moving lips.

"Let's talk about your meeting with the Chinese prime minister," says the host. "How was it?"

The president's plastered lips shape the words that his inimitable near-squeak rattles off, "It was rough going at first. He refused to apologize for Pearl Harbor."

I laugh, alongside the chuckles and hoots from the studio audience.

"Can you believe that?" the Bush voice continues. "These Chinese people are known to be very stubborn. It's why they're so good at math. They don't give up when they see fractions like they're supposed to."

White guy humor, I think, almost smiling.

My mother, the haze of sleep in her eyes, emerges from her room. It is one of the few times that she doesn't have to knock on my door for a couple of minutes just to wake me up. "Oh good, you're awake," she says. "Take care."

I stand up and give her a kiss on her cheek. "Good night, Ma." I take a peek inside her room and see Sophia in cute yellow overalls, spread-eagled on the bed.

TO WORK, I take nothing except my phone, wallet, and jacket. The main road is a five-minute walk away from my house. At this hour, cabs are many, and Manila roads reveal their true capacity for speed, zigzagging motorcycles and absentminded alley cats be damned.

At night, the Pasig River, a black unmoving depository of soiled diapers and salvage victims, gleams a-ripple under moonlight. The neoclassical buildings that dot the main roads are lit by undiscriminating spotlights. Invisible are the piles of trash, the unsightly power lines, the criminal negotiations.

Engulfed by shadows, in half-light, Manila is passably beautiful.

The taxi is traversing South Super Highway when the pudgy driver says that he once had a gay lover. In the universe of conversations with cab drivers, the route from a perfunctory question about your destination to a topic as odd as this is understandable. When he was in his teens, he says, newly arrived in Manila from Leyte, he found work at a garments factory. The supervisor was a gay man who let him stay in his house in Sta. Ana. "Treated me like a prince," he says, beaming. "Gave me all I needed. He was even at the church when I got married."

"Did he cry?" I ask.

"I didn't see," he says. "Too busy with my bride."

Makati's skyscrapers soon loom in the horizon, their windows like unblinking eyes in the face of the night.

My building's lobby is a sprawling affair with gilded columns and marble floors. There is a humongous bronze relief of rural scenery on one wall, backdrop to a long reception desk which at this hour is unmanned. People mill about, in various states of rush, panic, and carelessness.

UTelCo, my account, is on the 32nd floor. It is the biggest in the building: thirty teams of ten to twelve agents each, arranged in a mumbling beehive of cubicles sprawled over the entire stretch of the circular floor.

I arrive at my station twelve minutes before my one o'clock shift. Philip, on the next station to the right, is already here; Karen, who is supposed to be on my left, is probably putting on her black stilettos in her condo unit two blocks away, hair dripping wet, wording an excuse in her head just in case she is late, again.

"Hi," I mumble to Philip. His shift began an hour ago. "Queuing?"

He nods, toggles the "Mute" button onscreen and tells me he's still on his first call. He un-toggles "Mute" and, looking at me, flashes his biggest smile.

"Mr. Cooper," he says to his mic, looking at me, "I don't know what else to tell you." His usually calm voice is rapid, unable to hide a hint of irritation, "*No,* I'm not just saying it. We are doing everything we can to—" he stops and rolls his eyes; he's been cut off. In a few seconds, he tries again, "I'm afraid there's nothing we—" He hits "Mute" again and this time lets out a groan.

"Mr. Cooper, even if I let you talk to my supervisor, he will just tell you the same thing. We'll just be wasting—"

He hits "Mute" and curses under his breath. "Motherfucker."

"Very well," he concedes, sweetly. "OK. Please hold for my supervisor, then. I will try to see if he's available. Thank you for choosing UTelCo." Philip hits "Mute" again. He calls out to Eric, who sits on the far end of our spine. "Eric, sup call."

"OK, transfer," Eric says, putting on his headset.

Philip removes his headset complete with a theatrical unfurling of nonexistent locks.

"I need a break. Old man keeps telling me I'm from India. As if I have an Indian accent. *Tara, yosi.*"

Eric tells the one o'clock people to start logging in.

Karen has arrived, announced by the antiseptic air suddenly smelling like citrus. Those of us around her hear the sound of heavy clacking on her keyboard, the loud scrambling for her headset. She then takes a look at the digital clock on her computer and screams, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

12:59.

She is one tardiness away from getting suspended.

The whole spine—twelve people in jackets and sweaters and scarves, heads bowed, tied to the phones on their desks—erupts in laughter, but none louder than Karen's hyena-like ha-ha-ha's. Grateful for her luck, she takes her first call with uncommon energy, smiling flirtatiously as if the customer could see her low neckline through thousands of miles of undersea cable.

"Thank you for calling UTelCo Consumer—"

I adjust the foam-tipped mic so that it's the perfect distance of two inches from my mouth. I take a deep breath and press "Available" onscreen. A beep signals the first in the night's onslaught.

"Thank you for calling UTelCo Consumer Services," I tell the static, the faceless silence from the other side of the Pacific. "My name is Alvin."

I THINK ABOUT what Marie said and invite Scott for a drink. It is payday, I tell him. As luck would have it, he says, his grant money is coming in a little late. We agree to meet in Providence.

"Phone monkey," Scott says by way of greeting, as I pull a chair in a small table near the bar.

"White guy." I give him my brightest smile.

"Speaking of which," he says, "you know I was wondering if you'd cancel on me and I was going to be stuck here washing dishes. Not the worst way to spend a Saturday night, I say."

He takes a gulp of San Miguel, while I fish out a cigarette from a fresh pack. There is already an empty bottle on the table; he is halfway through his next. "Look at us. I'm broke. You have a job. You're paying for my beer. This is something."

"The beginning of the end for the white man."

"Right, right!" He laughs. "In my never-ending quest to find new ways to scrimp, know what I found out? Coffee without sugar tastes great." He takes a big swig and swallows hard, wincing. "All these years here I've been having that three-in-one in the sachet thing, and I love it! But you know, I ran out of sugar one day, and I just happened to have a bottle of Great Taste in my cupboard. It's horrible, this discovery."

"OK …"

"I'm not sure, but I suppose there's a lesson here about getting used to things, you know, bearing the, uhm, quiet, bitter dignity of change." His hands make the so-so gesture. "Adaptation, you know? Let me tell you

though. If you can get used to the appallingly limited variety of condoms in this country, you can get used to anything. *A*-ny-thing."

Even after so long, it still always jolts me, his foreignness. In a place like this, badly lit and enveloped in marbled smoke, his thinning blonde hair, green eyes, and pale complexion always seem to jump out, vigorous. When he talks, his consonants and vowels are forcefully rounded or short as required. My ears, I think, will never get used to this precision. My tongue and its armory of sounds will always fall short, embarrassed. It feels contrived, his presence in a place like this, his bright outline against the dim surroundings, the brown crowd, the brown bottle of beer wrapped in his pink fingers. It feels contrived, my words in response to his.

"So I've been thinking," he says, "when we *do* shed off something and we just don't shed that thing off, you know we also shed *that* which anchored us into it. Our favorite components, you know? Cheap pubs in a city. Sweetness in sugar. Brilliance in a beloved. It's all about that: anchors! In a world where distance is a function not so much of miles but sheer willingness, that's what we need: anchors." He pauses. "Maybe I ought to take these down."

"Actually," I say, "some people are trying to flee rather than stay. For them, staying in a place is incidental. It is not their true purpose. You've met my sister."

I always find my pronunciation clumsy when talking to Scott, so when he says, "That's a really good point, Alvin," I quietly rejoice at the comprehension, more than the concession. "But it doesn't make my point less valid, because when you leave a place and find something like this, like Manila, the exaltation inevitably becomes about the new place, the new thing. The discovery, the myriad possibilities. Like having bare coffee for the first time."

I take a gulp of beer.

"Like Manila," Scott says, eyes fixed somewhere distant. "Like unsweetened coffee."

I puff smoke upward.

It might have been the bar's amber lights now, but his green eyes seem almost leaden from where I sit.

"Anyway," he says, forcing a smile, "let's tiptoe away from that, OK? Very quietly now. Let's walk away."

"How's that book coming along?"

"Not really moving. Plodding, maybe. Lumbering. Hey how about that visit from your sister? Anybody lost a penis again?"

I chuckle. "Awkward, but that was expected. She has a new job. In Pagudpud."

"Nice. Nice."

"Want to hear something funny? She thinks we're still together."

"Really now," he cocks one eyebrow. "You didn't tell her?"

"I don't remember. She's barely home."

"Hey, wait a minute. Did you say Pa-gud-pad? That's the resort town in the north, right?"

Scott says that his forthcoming grant money has strict provisions for travel; the sponsors like to brag that they're "liberated" and "noninterventionist." So as much as he enjoys staying in his 24-square-meter palace here in the city, he's going to have to steal away to somewhere. "Want to come?"

"What about Ian?"

"He doesn't like lazing away and doing nothing. He feels—" he hums, in search for a word, "unproductive. So what do you say?"

He looks at me, emerald eyes to dark brown. A ballad starts to play, about the morning when you learn that your beloved has gotten married.

I remember the smell of Scott's scalp: like newly cut grass.

SCOTT'S PLACE—3H, a studio apartment on the third floor of a glum-looking beige complex—is just as I remember it, only tidier. The books on the wide shelves are now neatly arranged. There is no longer a carpet of paper on the patch of floor near his twin bed, no more empty boxes of takeout food, unused packets of condiments. The smell of soured laundry is gone, replaced by the *balikbayan* box scent, the smell of newness. The room is still chair-less, but there is a big blue-green bean bag in front of the TV. His computer, this room's nerve center, sits on his desk right by the curtain-less window, aglow.

"Still in 3H," I say to no one in particular, while he puts his brown satchel near the bed.

"Yep. Good ol' 3H."

I can tell he is watching my face, sidelong, in search of a flicker of recognition, maybe even nostalgia. I try to hide it, but my half-closed eyes glaze at the sight that was at once so familiar and distressing. 3H. How many

times did I arrive at this place unannounced to find the sheets ruffled a certain away, the scent of a stranger in the air?

From the door, I go to the bean bag, on the left, while he walks straight to the bed, on the right.

"Come here," he murmurs, like in Providence three years ago. I did not move then until he made it clear that he was talking to me—22-years-old, brown, and cowering under a baggy shirt—two tables away. He repeated and sweetly ordered, "Come here."

Tonight, I shake my head. "*You* come here."

The bean bag recedes under his flimsy weight, the sand-like pellets quickly rearranging and remolding into a new shape. His skin is warm. Upon closer inspection, I notice that his face is filled with red lines, the face of an old man. He smiles, and I fumble for irrelevant things to say. We've had too many beers, too much of each other, again. I long to run my hand down his scalp, to feel that foreign sweat, to realize that it's cold and sticky, like mine.

"Are you OK?" he asks.

I nod and recline to a more comfortable position. There is a long silence, and I am tired.

"Alvin?"

The distance between us, Scott and I surmounted it by showing a united front, by calling *this* home, by insisting that *we* are each other's homes. We had banked on our similarities and tried to deny the differences. But in the end, even our most cherished sameness—that we wished each other the best, that we were allies—was no longer enough to save us from each other and our own demons, our difficulties, and we had to come to terms with the brevity of things.

It is perhaps unfair to now blame the color of his skin, that when he saw the admiring glances, he only had to nod and the brown man would light up in joy, following him to this apartment, to that bed which I now try to evade. I have been one of those brown men.

He stands up to turn off the lights. Outside, what sounds like a rusty ten-wheeler rolls by, and the ground shakes, a half-hearted, momentary quake. When he returns, he settles behind me. He whispers something I don't hear.

"Look at me," he says. His breathing is deep and prolonged.

WHAT WAKES ME up is the certainty that I have done something wrong, that something wrong has taken place. Under the fault-finding light of the morning, the evidence: clothes strewn on the floor, a pack of condoms ripped possibly with teeth, Scott's arm perched on my tummy.

By the door is a figure of a man, unmoving. Clutched in his hand, unseen, is a key with 3H on the bow. I know; it used to belong to me.

With all the haste I can muster, I gather my clothes and head to the bathroom to put them on. In the whirlwind of inserting legs and arms into suddenly small holes, skin against cotton and coarse denim, I catch my harried face in the bathroom mirror. My chest is pounding, my cheeks burning.

To Ian, who still hasn't moved from under the doorway, I may have mumbled something as I rush outside, to the corridor, the stairs, this bright morning.

That night, I am again on the foul-smelling backseat of a cab on my way to work. Without meaning to, I find myself imagining how it's like to be in a faraway toll booth. The world at that point is neither happy nor sad; just infinitely, unbearably unfilled, until a pair of headlights emerge from the pitch-black horizon, like melancholy eyes under moonlight.