The Descending

GINO DIZON

The phone rang. Caroline was barely out of her dress. She had just come from a charity event for the orphans at City's Angels, where she was the guest of honor, and she hadn't even a moment's rest yet, and now this, and on the brink of a headache too. With a shoulder, she pinned the wireless against her ear; her hands were busy unhasping a knot of pearls around her throat.

Hello?

Static. But behind it, a human voice.

Hello? She did not often have to say the word twice.

Carol—the voice breaking through—*Caro-li-na*—

Pearls and fingers came to a deadlock. Who was this voice addressing her by a name she had shed long ago with that part of the past? It was not the usual enemy, her husband's mother, nor one of the neighbors, who liked to offer her those small precious flatteries. And yet somehow it sounded familiar. It did not waver. But paused. A cautious, female voice.

Yes? hard and sharp-drawn.

It's—it's *Emil*—

In the window, a sudden darkening, but whether the flight of birds, or another storm gathering, it was not yet settled. Her husband was not yet home. And this woman called him Emil. Pearls clattered on cold marble. *She called him Emil*. A nameless, faceless woman of a certain age was on the phone, informing her, her husband Emil, the Engineer, was in hospital, in intensive care—

Who are you? shouted Caroline. Who are you?

Long after the woman put the phone down, Caroline remained standing, the phone to her ear. She felt a tightening around the nape, the upper back—and the skin, how cold. But it was just the draft coming in from the window.

Then she realized she was naked. She had long slipped out of her dress, now a puddle around her feet, and had been standing at the center of a vast room, in which a stiletto dozed sideways on the carpet, and pearls stood still on marble, and in a glass bowl orchids lay in sheds of petal, all of which had nothing to do with an exposed body. She came to the window to draw the curtains. Instead she peered out, for a storm perhaps, or birds.

At a certain age she had married Emil. She had found her place. She had increased. At last she could make peace with those dark thoughts that at night kept her awake. She felt protected from life. She came home to a stone-and-glass house, where granite walls were wet with sheen, and cut glass was as plentiful as light. This house stood on Paradiseville, which to anyone in the city was real estate dream come true. She held sway over people in high and low places. It was her voice, some said, which in the span of a sentence could modulate from frivolity to eagerness to astuteness. And sometimes veiled a threat with pure charm. Men still sucked in their stomachs in her presence, and grandfathers looked away, perhaps to hide a foolish smile. In her thirties, she had retained a youthful slender body, whose fragility, many believed, made up the essential prettiness of the mestiza, and which, others whispered, hinted at a certain woman-hardness, what with those violent pronouncements of bone, especially the collarbone, and then the more obvious, the lack of children. But she was vice-president of Pantaleon de Miranda Construction, Angeles City's largest construction firm. And if this meant nothing to the detractor or sycophant at hand, which in most cases was the same person, her other position usually settled the matter. She was the wife of the Engineer, owner and president of the firm. And to anyone who knew anything about the city, this was saying a lot.

The Engineer was something of a local hero. After the calamity of Mount Pinatubo, when resident Americans and wealthy Angeleños were abandoning the city to its fate of an ashen desert, he alone invested in its land and rehabilitated it. Never for a moment did he lose faith in the land, was how he liked to put it afterward, although of course by then he was already gaining immensely from the resale of these numerous articles of faith. It was a role, many agreed, that only befitted him, who was the direct descendant of the illustrious family that more than two hundred years ago founded this city from the forest that it once was. Only now it was a diminishing family. The Engineer, who still had dash despite age, was its last scion. Buenafamilia daughters hounded him to no end. So did widows, spinsters, and others of an

unclassifiable variety. But, to everyone's disbelief, when he did finally decide to take a wife, whom should he choose but one of the firm's low-ranking agents, who, yes, was a mestiza, but in the way the city often bred them: of a complexion you could not place, that inexplicable wash of tan, and therefore of dubious origin. Also, the woman Carolina Patarata was young enough to be his own daughter. A classic case, some said then. True love, others dared. The Viuda Pantaleon de Miranda kept nursing her throat with those lozenges she kept in a small gold-plated tin. But for a long time her voice did not return. Still-living aunts spun their schemes. Ancestral bones turned in their graves. Amid outrage, spikes, and traps, what happened happened. The city had its cause célèbre.

Caroline, now Mrs. Pantaleon de Miranda nee Patarata, bore it all with the silent endurance of a woman who would not be denied. She knew her rights. She also knew what she had to do. She applied herself as no one else could in the conjugal home, but more importantly, in that domain closest to her husband's heart, the firm. By charm or threat, she singlehandedly prevented a crisis in upper management. She revived shelved projects. And saw them through. Like that civic project of mid- to low-cost housing at Lele Sapa—for, after all, didn't the poor deserve a proper community too? Yes, perhaps they did, now that Caroline was beyond it all. It was a success. She made an appearance at the Mayor's ceremony. In a tight-fitting dress, she wielded her pearls, and also her husband. And to the people present then, the couple had taken on the aspect of an epic the city never had. Caroline became vice-president, but continued to direct pet projects in CSR, like that partnership with the orphanage. Soon she was playing an active role in the city's affairs. Nuns, civic groups, politicians, and beggars of all kind succumbed. She held out a hand. They all came flocking. For a touch, a kiss, or more simply, her signature of approval. No one dared imagine, least of all Caroline, that a triumph such as hers, would end in the hospital, to be settled by a mere signature.

HE'S GOING TO go on, the doctor said, sleeping like this.

The patient in bed, surrounded by apparatuses that exposed his heartbeat or his breath, did nothing to disprove this. The bloated fingers; the white and cracked lips; that face, Caroline saw as she stood by the bed, that face. It was no longer scored by worry, already a boy's again. The mother-in-law, who had decided to come garbed in shawls and encrusted with precious stones, had taken the sofa at the corner of the room, where she promptly contorted her

face, threatening to make a show of grief. For the moment she was containing herself well. But Caroline refused to turn. She stood by the bed. She was shut behind her face. She could not mourn. She was knotted tight. Could she scratch that sleep off his face, shake him back into wakefulness, for an answer, a name, anything to justify the knife—but his sleep was so peaceful, he was already blameless.

The doctor took the Engineer's pulse. Then added, maybe two, three more days. And proceeded to expound: *It's congenital*.

From her corner the mother was heard expelling a howl from a most uncooperative throat.

Caroline did not speak or move. But stood still, inwardly fumbling after that word that was not *congenial*, but was a cheat—as though her husband's death was some inheritance from an entire line of sleep-stricken fathers—it did not justify.

She looked at the doctor then, but only from an angle. The graying hair; the bespectacled eyes; the crow's feet that spread from the corners of the eyes. He looked like a man worn out, but happily so, by the weight of all his years, including the years of all the children he ever fathered. But he did not look the sort who would lie to a child. So he was going to leave for now, to give her time to think, arrive at what she thought was best.

Nights passed, or just hours. Caroline did not relinquish her position by the bed. But stood guarding it in varying assertions of silence, that at one point the mother in the corner, perhaps troubled by this unusual ritual of grief, had to interrupt her own weeping, to blink repeatedly, and hard. She made those small scratchy noises people made when they craved for human conversation, but was soon spared this ordeal as the relatives arrived. The necessary aunts; the interchangeable cousins; the bigwigs at the firm, also relatives. They all came bearing in their hands and faces sympathy and consolation, the kind that people used to skim through the surface of other people's lives. But mostly this was for the mother only. For the wife, they saw, was already enclosed in her own grief. And would be blind to their correct gestures, or else might see through them. And still one of them dared insinuate, now—now that the firm's future—

Caroline shot that person a glare, an old man with an equine face, whose hair in fact looked like a big wig. She opened her mouth, as though to scream, but the sound remained thin and dry in her throat. While the man, in his defense, promptly adopted the voice of wisdom, it was important, this was

a moment of crisis, the entire firm was at stake. Which in the history of the city, they will remember, had always played a crucial role. When Mount Pinatubo erupted more than twenty years ago, and all the GI's abandoned Clark Airbase, and the wealthy residents their own city, was it not then that the young Emilio balked at no risk and proved the impossible? And his father before him, who after the Vietnam War, when all those distant-eyed GI's returned and took to marrying the locals, was he not the one who built the first villages for these new families, and thus prompted the city into a new season of prosperity? And farther back, back to the beginning of it all, was it not the first Don Angel Pantaleon de Miranda, whose name this city still bears and will forever commemorate, was he not the one who with a small band of men from upper San Fernando hacked his way across this rivered forest, and drove all beasts and black aborigines back into the mountains, by merely brandishing the white statue of the Most Holy Virgin of the Rosary, till finally a first clearing was made—so the eulogist went on, slashing his way through the thickets of history, losing Emil in the refuse of memory.

Just then, outside the window, the night flickered and the sky exploded. Caroline turned and faced her husband's relatives. As always she found herself alone with her husband on one side of the room, and the rest on the other side. But this time, she had been illuminated, or blinded, by lightning. She could put an end to all this now. *The patient's present condition, as well as the possible clinical outcome, has been fully explained to the undersigned*. She needed only use her name.

Caroline walked away then, away from all that madness of hands and words and faces, and pursued the hospital's maze of corridors and stairs. She turned right and passed by two nurses who were murmuring giddy whispers of love. She wanted to reprimand them back into work. Instead she turned left, as directed, past a room where a patient was coughing up his soul in such hacking precision. And still Caroline proceeded up the stairs, the expelled soul just trailing her now with the unsteady footsteps of the newly disembodied. And still she moved unfazed through a corridor of windows, which after what seemed an age still framed a flickering night, or was it just raining again, or was it raining still, but if you did not see the rain, did it count, and if it did, how did the city find its way back, the next morning, the first morning—

She reached Intensive Care. The corridor blared with a hard bright light. It dissolved all gradations of dark, from shadow to soul, except certain black thoughts. It was windowless, and filled with clocks, though there was just

one. So then, Caroline said, she waited here. That nameless, faceless woman of a certain age, she waited for my husband here. Caroline tried to imagine her on the bench, the mechanics of her hands, the states of her mind, but the woman remained faceless. Then Caroline removed her shoes and sat on the floor without ceremony. She laid an arm on the chair. On the arm, she rested her head. At last she could close her eyes.

In the ensuing darkness, she saw her husband again without seeing his face. They were back in that park again, one distant afternoon. A young agent knew the city like the back of her hand and had taken her boss to her secret place by the river. It was the Abacan River, which no longer flowed, and a park that wasn't really, just a patch of earth abandoned to itself. But how could one resist? It was one of those spots a city always yields to the one who will see. A tree-covered piece of bank, on an elevated bend of the river. From the bank you could see the entire length of the river. It began in the east, somewhere at the foot of Mount Arayat, it seemed, and wound its great path right across the city, then wandered on to the west, where it took a final curve somewhere in the Zambales Mountains, domain of Mount Pinatubo itself, now a faint jaggedness in the sky. Angeles, the river-split. Here was the exact breach of the city, a river-path from mountain to mountain. And here they were on that part of the bank, still undisturbed by drill or tractor, and grown rock-hard with volcanic matter. But the tree that stood above them was still alive. Its roots were forever lost to the depths of unopened rock. But its mighty branches still strove skyward, twisting, writhing, till they overarched, spanned, and leafed through the sky—it was drizzling. That afternoon, they sat beneath that tree, which was now their tree, sharing an umbrella, but which was of course no longer necessary. Under the umbrella of that tree, they sat close to each other, not talking, just breathing, as they watched the river's end. Already, out of the city's bare elements, they had made themselves a garden: rocks, rain, a tree, two breaths.

After the funeral, she went straight home, alone. She would go on living now, but how, she had no idea. The firm had offered her an extended leave. A show of respect, her husband's kin said, although she knew now they couldn't wait to tear all her husband's work apart. She took it. Dismissed all the household help. And cut the phone lines. She fed the cat, the way her husband used to, from the palm of the hand. She trimmed the flowers, her husband's orchids of a purple variety. You knew when they were about to wither: they turned into gold. When it rained, she stayed inside the house.

And rearranged the furniture, then moved them around again. The trouble with love between human beings was not the heartbreak, which after a while was no longer so compelling. Not even the absence—you got used to that too. It was the freedom that was terrible, the unstructured time, the gaping. Life simply did not abate, and from all sides you were exposed.

Caroline swept the marble of the floor, and ventured into the depths of jars. In the abyss, the sand's texture had a brash fineness. In the wind, it billowed in veils of dust. She washed herself of the day's accumulations, and adopted a lazy attitude in the sun. But where the sun hit surfaces, it turned hostile and hurt the eyes, and behind them, the brain. She turned to corners, where forgotten things lay thick with cobwebs. She got entangled in their threads, but drew back, and tore, and hit. Till at last she pulled herself out and disposed of their remains, in the day, at night, through the hours, the next morning, the first morning—the phone began ringing.

It would ring in the middle of a chore. It would ring in her sleep, even in the leisurely course of taking a dump. She would give a start, especially at the first abrupt ring that betrayed the sharp cavernousness of the empty house. In panic, she would drop her chore, but then remember there was no phone. She had cut all the lines. She searched all secret cupboards, the underside of surfaces, but found no phone. And the ringing continued.

So then she won't leave me alone, Caroline concluded, or decided.

That morning of the funeral, in the cemetery, as she stood over the coffin, she became aware for the first time of the presence of the faceless woman. At first, it was just a vague flickering figure, an inkling. But as she squinted her eyes, it began to take form, in the distance, half-hidden behind a tree. The woman wore black. And held above her an open umbrella, though it was not raining. Caroline just kept her in the corner of her eye then. But when the woman took her path home, Caroline trailed her in the car. And the woman took this and that turn, and Caroline took this and that turn. Somewhere along the way, one woman lost another.

But now she won't leave me alone, Caroline decided. Then I will learn to live with her. And Caroline did. It would ring at different hours. The call followed no schedule. But so did Caroline. Instead she steered herself into that place between expectation and surprise. It was safer that way. Until one day, it happened. Caroline woke up. It was the cold. A phone was ringing. Her back was cold, her arm too. There was a phone ringing. There was a dream, too. The foggy atmosphere of the dream still surrounded her. The

dream was too involved for her to remember now, but it had not yet slipped away, not quite yet. She had been sleeping on her side again, but it was the cold of the tiled floor against her skin—the floor of the bathroom. She was in the bathroom. She sat bolt upright. She had fallen asleep, it seemed, naked, she saw now, on the bathroom floor. The last thing she remembered was she had been flushing something, something—*it must have been something*—in the toilet bowl. She pushed the lever, the water rushed in a rhythmic swirl, a powerful suck punctuated it. She pushed the lever again. The water came swirling again. *She was drowning*. She was drowning—*at sea*. Caroline wrapped the bathrobe tight around her body to muffle the shiver. She sat on the toilet seat. She focused her thoughts. It was the phone ringing, as much as the troublesome dream, that awoke her, she was now sure.

In the bedroom, outside the window, it seemed like a darkness descending upon the horizon, somewhere to the west. But as she approached the window, there was a great swooping, a movement of sky. Caroline, still in her bathrobe, stepped out into the balcony. The air was a hot humid blast, as when the weather has not yet broken, but is about to. All the roofs and treetops of Paradiseville lay before her in neat rows of streets. Sudden birds, small and swift, burst from one treetop and scattered in the wind, before darting into other, more distant canopies. Were they in some sort of a game, or a kind of commotion, she could not yet say. Then she saw them. From the direction of the jagged mountains to the west, they came, what looked like all the dark birds in the world. They came populating the western sky. A familiar fearfulness, the kind that had no identifiable bodily source, rooted her to the spot, as had taken her when she was still a girl, and a volcano from that same direction flung all its birds into flight and spewed its black breath of bilious skies. Black envoys of the fiery god, Daddy used to say. They came nearer, nearer, powered by currents of their own making, you could feel it above you, around you, a furor of sky, a ransacking of wind, but with the beating of muddied wings. She opened her mouth, as though to utter a word or invent some sound that would equal the occasion. But, nothing. Only they arrived, blotting out the sky, and casting the myriad mottling of their leaf-shaped shadows, that glided across the street, across her garden, and now her arms. They flew eastward, to the direction of Mount Arayat, gentle sanctuary of dormant rock, its broken peak just visible in the distance. In their wake the birds left behind the dark. That night the rain fell.

Wet, soaked, and cold in her bones, Caroline went back inside. She must now go and see if any of the windows were still open, her mother used to

say to her as a girl, on nights of rain. It was one terrible night of rain, and the house was leaking, and there were clumps of hair. In the dark Caroline negotiated the stairs that fanned downward. She had lost the habit of turning on the lights. But the dark was not new to her. If her descent was slow, it was only because some depths took time to reach. Then, across the bay windows, lightning flashed and split earth from sky. And shocked all glass into splintered reflections of itself. It had exposed the house. The house was an open dome of glass. Between house and night was nothing. Thunder followed, a detonation of night, a trembling of glass. Somewhere mahogany might have rumbled, and the rock cracked open, returning to the basic forms of quartz, mica, and feldspar. Against the window, the rain could have been a spraying of sand. And then the phone rang. And kept ringing.

Caroline felt with the sole of her foot the cold of the marble, which for the moment was still keeping up its semblance of permanence. She rested her hand on the rail. In her sleep she had a dream, in which she was drowning at sea. It was dark, and water was filling her mouth, and the salt in her throat. A man came to save her. He had powerful arms and a strong back. He carried her to shore. He laid her flat against the sand, raspy against her back. The man pressed his rough-hewn face hard against her cunt, and then upward, against her navel, against her breasts, her throat. His hip slid in between her thighs. Then his fish, fat and thick, slivered into her center. She gasped in the wind. Lightning flashed. When her face fell on one side, she saw her. At the moment of lightning, a figure by the sea, beneath an umbrella. The umbrella-woman, just standing on the shore, watching them. But the moment Caroline searched her black face and met her invisible eyes, she saw it was her, Caroline, who was really standing by the sea, and the umbrella-woman who lay pinned between man and sand. No, she wanted to scream then, something was wrong, she was not supposed to be there, for when she woke up, in the bathroom, the wetness, that wet—it was hers.

In the lull of rain, in the interval of lightning, Caroline closed another door to her life. With just a billowy bag slung over her shoulder, she stole to her car. But as she was about to get in, the poor thing, it let out a sad mewl, crouched on a field of petal-gold, in a garden of geometric cuts and stark wet colors. Caroline gave the orphan cat a pat then, and scooped a handful of the petals, because she could not resist them, her husband's orchids. She put them in her bag, perhaps a final token. That night Caroline drove through the gates of Paradiseville. And did not look back. The rain fell for days on end. Now and then there was a lull. But this, too, was just an oversight of the elements.

For the most part, a monotonous patter fell without respite, that blurred the edges of things, and made people grow quiet, a little expectant perhaps, but for what, no one knew, so that altogether the world outside windows began to lose its solidity.

CAROLINE STEPPED ON the gas and sped down the highway. She had been drifting across the city for some days now, how many, she couldn't say. Once the rain began, it grew into a season. A perpetual nimbus-twilight spread across the city that made keeping hours irrelevant. But tonight, only a patter. But Caroline had caught sight of the umbrella-woman again, who was proving to be one slippery chase. Agitation—and the fear of the triteness of womanhood into which her dead husband had reduced her in the end—propelled the car into sudden stops and lunges down the road. Pedestrians, assisted only by legs and umbrellas, and now splattered with mud, spat out curses. Cars blared their horns in anger. In the city of accustomed feet, the tempo of panic was not yet acceptable in the streets. But Caroline could not stop now.

Since she left home, she had been spending her life in various places across the city. Any place was habitable, she now knew, and one so adjustable, it all depended on the insignificance of one's life. Lodgings weren't a problem; there were hotels and inns from north to south, and coffee shops and restaurants, which kept rising from the previous rubble and earth-rot. Here the work of building went on, despite season or calamity, perhaps to appease the need for continuity. And she was certain she would find her. Angeles was just a forty-minute city where you couldn't hide a face for so long, and Caroline knew it like the back of her hand. But the umbrella-woman continued to elude her. She would persuade Caroline along a main street, down a proper well-intended street. Then suddenly she'd make a turn, into a side street perhaps, an abrupt shortcut, an accidental alley. This in turn opened into many more belated streets, where houses stood, and behind their lit windows ordinary-seeming lives still kept up appearances, but all dubious, and seductively so, in the dark of rain.

Up north, along Fields Avenue, beside Clark, bars and clubs sprang to life with a blaring of lights. But respectful of shadows too, as sometimes loving is better in the dim. And the umbrella-woman was just moving through the shadows now, and Caroline, in her car, trailing her quietly. Then the woman slipped into a street that did not permit cars. Caroline pulled over beside what looked like the gaping skeleton of a house carved of its roof and contents. At its center was now prospering a tree of knotted branches. Its gnarled roots

had overcome the earth, had invaded and cracked open the curb. Caroline stood for a moment and looked around her, as though uncertain for the first time. She ventured on foot into the wet, narrow street. But when she emerged on the other side, it was to find a kind of no-man's-land, traversed only by a canal, or was it a river, but perhaps a creek, except that somewhere, somewhere, there was the sound of—and this, Caroline could not believe or accept—cascading waterfalls, in Angeles. Where was this? But it was raining hard. But it was pitch-black. She could not see well.

In the middle of the city, near Pampang, she saw the umbrella-woman disappear into the labyrinth of the wet market. Caroline, despite her troop of housemaids, had always insisted on going to the market herself. Only she knew which cut or bleed her husband liked. So she knew this maze. And yet, when she emerged out of the final turn, it was into a precipice, or almost, which really was a bank of the Abacan, fenced only by wire. In the rain, the river had almost started flowing again. Only boulders and heaps of garbage could be seen now; the scabby patches of bedrock, barely so. Down the river, three half-naked boys as thin as monkeys were now taunting the riverling with the mockery of their angular dives. And just some distance away, one of her husband's pet-monsters, a bulldozer, stood helpless, half-buried in the mud. Its upheld paw-blade was still displaying its latest quarry in the wet. On the opposite bank, NO TO QUARRYING was painted in letters that dripped like black grease across the wall of an abandoned warehouse, whose pipes were grafted straight into the river. But the umbrella-woman was nowhere to be found.

Then at last, she had her trapped, or so Caroline thought. They had just passed by the cathedral in the south, the old part of the city, which her husband said was modeled after the Byzantine style, and held only by egg whites, but impervious to earthquakes. He said this, all of a sudden, in the middle of a conversation that had nothing to do with religion or architecture. As usual he was mentally pursuing a second line of thought again, while keeping up a first. He was that kind of man. Caroline stepped on the gas. Her husband was dead. No one could scold her now for the way she drove. She followed the woman into a street she knew, there was no mistaking it. Then she stopped the car and got down. Electric wires stretched crisscrossed across a leaden sky. Rivulets were streaming from potholes and down the pavement. Rats, the size of newly born kittens, were feasting on the mess of blood and bones and fur of what was formerly a whole animal. But there was no umbrella-woman. The street itself had turned out to be a dead end. And

she had lived in Angeles all her life, where she was Carol once, in her bygone vagabond days, when without a dramatic notion of fate, she had worked rounding up the city's every nook and cranny for potential sites, and she was Caroline next, when the Engineer took her by the hand and housed her in an office that held a view of the river that they now owned, and only now, now that she could never again be that Carolina girl of Lele Sapa, who once ran lolloping beside the river, only now did she confirm her suspicion that some streets closed on you forever.

So she could not stop now. Only pursuit still made sense. And on this night of monotonous patter, when the moment of lightning came, Caroline saw her. The woman, across the street, by a lamppost that held no fire, as usual beneath her umbrella. The woman got into a tricycle. Caroline, in her car, followed from a distance. This was in Cutcut, past the old cemetery, south of the city. Early in her career, this used to be just woods, and where the trees receded, grazing fields for the occasional cattle, mostly of the cattle caravan stock. Now the area had been zoned. Gated communities were being built, Southville, The Enclave, Creek Park, some of them by the firm. Around them, various establishments had been opened of course, restaurants, parks, gyms, that made living more manageable.

The umbrella-woman got off at some distance from the coffee shop. By Caroline's mental map, they were now along the southernmost boundary of the city. This was an out-of-the-way coffee shop, that featured an al fresco balcony in gilt and mother of pearl, surrounded by cypresses and lifelike statues of gods and horses exiled from a Mediterranean setting. It was not a place meant for people without cars. The umbrella-woman walked the intervening distance. Perhaps it was less conspicuous that way; the rattling noise of the tricycle-contraption pulling over front-of-shop would have drawn too much attention. The umbrella-woman went inside. Caroline, in her jogging pants and a hooded sweater, made her move.

She grabbed the woman by the shoulder. She felt her fingers sink deep into flesh. Caroline was surprised at her own feat; she had never before needed to use a hand to dispose of another human being. Now she saw how it was done. Only, when the woman turned, she was not the umbrella-woman, but just a girl, or maybe a young woman, perhaps of the same hair, the same height. For a time, they stood facing each other in shocked silence. Then, sensing the general hush that had fallen across the tables and the averted eyes around them, Caroline made a quick thrifty apology, she made a mistake, she thought the girl was someone she knew, but this, too, came out like a hiss,

unpracticed as she was in making apologies. She ended up inviting the girl to a table at the corner.

The girl, still stunned senseless by the hard fingers of the angular woman, accepted. Dessert led to a glass of wine, and then to another. The girl was apparently a college student, in her sophomore year, on a rendezvous in a place that was well beyond her means. She asked Caroline to stay, please, if she can. Her man had sent her a text message. He had cancelled at the last minute. Now she had no idea what to do. Not even how to get home; tricycles and jeepneys didn't pass by the area. The bastard, that bastard—her voice broke, and her tears too. Caroline froze. She would have shut her eyes. It was terrible watching a soul gape itself open to display its black wounds. At the same time, she felt bound to this girl, whom she had attacked, and who, like her, had that distinct complexion, those strands of bronze at certain angles of light.

He's married, the girl blurted out. He's a married man. She had controlled her tears. Her voice no longer wavered. Only the wine now was trembling in its glass. Outside, the rain was lashing the windows in precise whips.

I see. There was a coldness of glass in Caroline's voice. But also, like glass, a brittleness. My husband cheated on me. Then promptly died.

For the first time the two women looked into each other's faces. And at that moment something began, as when two souls are no longer afraid of stroking each other with the tips of their feathers. The wine in the glasses had subsided. Outside, the rain had dwindled into a drizzle. The girl was one of those college girls, and whether she was making a confession or simply purging herself, it no longer mattered. An orphan, and pretty too, the way most mestizas in the city were, like Caroline. Besides she lived only with her grandmother. What choice did she have? Married or not, and most of them older. She needed the money. Caroline was an orphan too. And grew up in an orphanage, a home for abandoned children, children with no relatives, mostly children of GI's and local women. But the worse part was, Caroline had lived some of her life with her parents, too. She *knew* her parents. Daddy went abroad after the calamity of Mount Pinatubo. Like many fathers, he went abroad for work, and like many fathers, was never heard from again. Mama, meanwhile, locked herself up in the house. But it was raining. But it was dark. The roof was leaking. Flood was rising. Mama was tearing her hair out—or just scratching her scalp. Mama wept with no tears, no sound, just those clumps of hair and those hard bony fingers. Mama did not go to

sleep again. To the very end, she could not resume. Mama's father was a GI, a veteran of the Vietnam War, whose eyes were always looking somewhere far. One day he crossed the yard, and walked through the gate, and disappeared forever. Now it was like Daddy had done the same thing. It was the same old story.

Caroline ground to a halt. They had reached what the girl pointed out was her grandmother's house. It was an improvised structure of unpainted hollow blocks, patched up in some places by bare plywood. A small store was propped up in front. Flood had muddied the garden. Before she got down, the girl looked Caroline in the face once more.

You're pretty, she said. The girl offered a smile, and in turn recovered her youth. I think I've seen you before.

Caroline almost smiled too, but instead opted for a nod. It's a small city. We've seen everyone else before.

Then the two parted with no further promise. They had trespassed into each other. They had imposed upon each other a friendship. And in that friendship, had ratified themselves. It no longer mattered if they did not meet again.

ONCE LONG AGO, it all happened at a time like this. In those days, the lord of the east still lived on top of Mount Arayat. He was a kind and gentle lord to all the people he ruled. He gave them everything: fruit, rain, and wind, and grain, the land's own yield. And the people were happy, for there was plenty on the tables and shelves, and at night they could sleep without worrying that a horde of locusts might dragon across their fields. But one day, some of the villagers grew restless and began to want more, especially the treasure that, it was rumored, the lord was withholding deep in his mountain-fortress: gold, metals, precious stones.

Now the lord of the east had a daughter, an only child. And there was another god, a turtle-god, who lived in the jagged mountains to the west. This turtle-god, this terrible god, wanted the girl for his bride. But the lord of Arayat would never permit it. For the turtle-god had a fiery breath that could scorch the skies, and powerful claws that could gash open the earth itself. But the villagers did not take heed. They drew this monster into their scheme. They would steal his bride for him, but in exchange for gold, which he alone could obtain with his armored back and dragon claws. And so one night, as the lord of Arayat slept, the turtle-god dug a path from west through forest to

east, straight into the depths of Mount Arayat itself, and obtained the gold, and the people rewarded him with his bride.

When the lord of Arayat woke up and discovered what had taken place, he was angry and aggrieved. He stopped giving the people anything now. A long drought began, till the earth was parched and broken by treacherous cracks, and the endless rain poured, and still the lord gave bent to his grief, and still the rain fell, and the lord disappeared, and the whole land was flooded, until the turtle's path became the river that flowed—

And then?

What happened next?

Why are you stopping?

Three girls asked this in chorus. Three little girls on the sofa, their legs dangling, feet barely touching the floor. Not a moment ago, they were crying, bawling really, also in unison. Thunder broke, and wind and rain smashed a window in their room. Michiko was supervising the repairmen. They were fixing a leak that was flooding the kitchen. But the three girls were inconsolable, crying without shame, as only children are still capable of. So Caroline, who was just visiting, had no choice.

She tried to appease them with tentative hushes, everything will be all right. Still they wept, and whether it was for the broken window, or the rain outside, or the night itself, you could no longer tell. One was Amerasian, Caroline could tell right away, by that pointed and upturned nose. The second had the tight black body of the aborigine, those intricate, frizzy curls. She knew her from past visits. The third was new. Caroline could not place her yet, dusky, slant-eyed, the nose sharp. She must remember to ask Michiko.

Caroline had no children of her own, but was once a child too. She seated the three on the sofa and told them that story she knew. The only story Daddy ever told her in those sober moments of affection. Only, now, Caroline couldn't continue. It was a gap of story. This was the part where she always cried, and Daddy stopped to reassure her that everything would be all right. Now she couldn't even remember if Daddy had ever finished the story.

But, of course, the lord of the mountain saved his daughter. And the rain ended, and everyone lived happily ever after. You know how it always ends.

It was Michiko. She had entered the room. She had finished the story. As usual she had brought the sunshine with her, that made the girls smile and burst into joy. Back in their days here in the orphanage, Michiko and Caroline

were inseparable, like sisters. Michiko was older by some years, and was part-Chinese, but was condemned by some nun into a Japanese name. The nun couldn't see well, and was Benedictine. *Ora et labora*. But Michiko had a good disposition. She had endured her name, and also, Caroline's friendship. They went to college on a scholarship. But Caroline left, and Michiko stayed behind. This was her lot, she said then. When the orphanage was secularized and expanded, she became its director.

Michiko knelt in front of the three girls. She looked at the first, they shouldn't be scared anymore, then turned to the second, this house was built on high ground, and then ended facing the third, so they were safe here. Now go and play with the others. In that way Caroline saw how it was done, how to apportion your love to three separate beings, though you were just one. And the three girls ran along.

You'll always have a place here, Carol. Michiko had begun tying the ribbons of the curtains by the window. She was standing with her back to Caroline. At this age, after all these years, she had not asked why she should be tying ribbons in an orphanage on a night like this. Had she perhaps succumbed and preferred the safety of illusions, or did she survive, had she made it to the other side? But Caroline did not ask. Always a square woman in everything, including her figure, Michiko's back was expansive and solid, and her legs, like those of a basketball player. But that was the form of dependability. And Caroline was still pendent in a kind of suspension. Ever since her encounter with the girl at the coffee shop, Caroline no longer knew what or where, least of all how. And yet she kept waiting, waiting for something, she didn't know what. Only that it was bound to happen. And once the rain abated, then perhaps she would know. So she could not rest. She could not stay.

That night Caroline, armed only with a billowy bag, went out into the city once more. The rain had still not let up. The city had been warned of possible flooding. Still Caroline went out into the city. As did the others.

Two murmuring lovers at the corner, beneath a lamppost that gave off only a watery glow, were in a kind of quarrel, or was it a form of worship, or simply a coaxing? Perhaps it did not matter. They were walking now, hands held, and love was what it was.

Caroline crossed the street. An old, expensive-looking woman wrapped in overflowing shawls was taking the opposite route. Her shawls were trailing behind her in the night wind; such was the function perhaps of certain human implements.

Caroline continued down the street. In the distance, a poor soul was braving the pavement, which was slippery when wet. It was, after all this time, still getting used to its disembodied form.

Caroline reached the entrance to Abacan Bridge, which spanned the river-gap. Three half-naked boys as thin as monkeys were plashing every puddle they could with their agile feet. When they reached the middle of the bridge, they climbed its iron railing—and jumped. Some cars stopped then, and other people, forgetting their gasps inside the car, went out. But it was not suicide, as others later attested. It was something more extravagant, more vital: a dive, a plunge on a rainy night into a river that was now flowing once more. Under the bridge, along the banks of the river, Caroline found the path, the familiar path of long ago. It led into Lele Sapa, where she grew up.

It used to be one of those neighborhoods where houses just sprout one by one, until the street becomes a street, and many years later, when all the houses have contaminated each other with their dilapidation, still the street remains the same. Unpaved always, and smoking dust, till the afternoon slaking. For in its progress the mother-city just leaves this fledgling street behind, under the shade of acacias from another time. It was a misnomer besides, for the neighborhood edged not a stream but a river, the Abacan. Now, in the flood, it looked like an empty neighborhood of run-down houses in a permanent state of blackout. Shadows bred thickly, and certain animal forms, feline-like, just slinked in and out of the corner of the eye. All the houses had sunk closer to the earth, or else the earth had risen up and reclaimed part of its own. Black and wet mud, and at every step, an exhalation of earth, and rot, and crushed insects.

Caroline removed her shoes. It was easier using flesh against flesh. Then at last, at the end of the street, she reached the house. The house that leaked one night of rain. It bore the burden of its years: the sag and bloat of the walls; the chipped capiz shells of the windows; the balusters that stood headless now. Caroline made her way around the house, down the path of her forgotten childhood, that led into the river. On its bank, she sat once more, but did not weep, it was no longer possible to, it was too late now. She sat still, and merely asked, of the night perhaps, What now? And the night did not answer.

But the river did.

For gradually, like some far-off music, but coming nearer and nearer, the water came with the sound and spirit of its flow, a full but gentle current, that

soon was spilling on to the banks. Caroline knelt by the river, that was now once more the mighty Abacan River—the River of Morning.

She touched the water with her own hands. This compelled belief. Then the river gave off lights. Tiny flames of light, as of candles, but floating only on the surface, as though mere reflections—

You are looking for something, child? said the voice above her.

Caroline gave a start, but recovered her posture, and now stood, regarding the old man before her. The man was standing on what looked like a raft, holding what was in fact a candle. His hair was gray and long, and fell in fine strands. His eyes were tired and sleepy, wrinkled by crow's feet. But they were eyes that had not lost their joy. Behind him, on rafts and makeshift ferryboats, were others, people variously garbed, and that made no sense together. A river procession, lit only by candles.

In the river? said the old man. You are looking for something—in the river?

Caroline blinked, and then closed her mouth. Then she opened her mouth again, to speak. Yes, she said. Or, no. Or, I don't know. I was just—I saw the candles.

I see, said the old man. Though what he saw, Caroline couldn't say. Come with us, he said. He took a step, and held out his hand.

Caroline took it. Where are you going?

I could ask you the same thing, returned the old man, a warm strength gathering in his hand now, and as a consequence, in Caroline's too. But I will tell you. To the west, where the river ends.

Caroline stepped on the raft. It did not tremble beneath her weight. I see, it was her turn to say, but did not. But she did see more clearly now the people in the other rafts. The monkey boys; the woman with the shawls; the whispering lovers; and others, all of whom looked familiar, Caroline must have seen them all before. On every raft stood young girls in school uniforms bearing baskets in their arms. Caroline looked at the old man then, her mouth in the shape of a question, but the old man was already answering her.

I am visiting an old friend, he began. We have been enemies for so long that now we are also friends. At this, the old man held out his arm, and with his candle lit a circle. Do you see those two there? Those whispering lovers? And that wobbly soul there? And that woman, she is bringing her

shawls—they are water to the touch. We are taking all these to my friend. Then perhaps once more we could put an end to this night. Now I must ask you, the old man faced Caroline, what do you have with you?

Caroline, who had never thought it possible again, did understand now. She had only a bag with her. She plumbed its depths. Out of which she rescued a handful of petals that blazed in the night.

So then you have brought fire, the old man said. Delight crinkled his face. After a difficult readjustment of the spine and bones, the old man seated himself on the edge of the raft. Sit with me for a while now, he said. And the old man and the woman sat there together, the water up to their knees, like father and daughter on a mission down the river. The old man cupped the petals in his roughened palms, where they returned into their original form of pollen. He cast them upon the river, and the pollen touched the surface of the water. Soon fish swam to the surface, and with their fish-mouths took the pollen-gold. They swam back into the river-depths, where they spread into a galaxy of gold, that outshone the diffident moon of drizzle, that gilded the faces in that dark procession, and that revealed on either side of the river—the forest.

The giant trees would have canopied the river with the anarchy of their sprawling branches, but they had no leaves. The branches, hairy with vines, thick with fungus, extended upward in convoluted knots and difficult angles of ascent. But they could afford such postures, for their roots were gnarled deep into the earth, and hard. Instead of leaves, only dark birds crowned the trees. They were flitting, gliding it seemed, from tree to tree, in a kind of an unhurried migration homeward. Below, from behind trees, small black men armed only with spears and stony silence were watching the progress of the procession. Around them animal forms were slinking on padded feet. All this, the blazing river revealed now.

Now the river-path between us will always be lit, the old man said.

Caroline rested her head on the old man's shoulder then. For a long time, they just sat that way, the fiery water lapping in between and around their legs.

Then at last Caroline asked, Why did you disappear? If there was a tone of resentment in her voice, it was only because she had begun to sound like a girl once more.

The old man was silent at first, and then spoke in a hoarse, weary voice. But there was no other way, don't you see? This is the only way. The old man

just looked at the river and said no more. Bird shadows glided across the river, but the shadows disturbed neither surface nor current. And when the old man spoke again, it was in a benevolent, elderly tone: You must resume.

Caroline and the old man, they looked at each other then, and in this way, came to an understanding. Caroline pressed a kiss on the old man's forehead. She kissed him because she had found him. And because this first meeting was also their last. Some meetings are always the last. Three monkey-thin boys of ruffled hair, who were experts at paddling, escorted Caroline to another raft. In this way, the river-procession left the woman Caroline behind, who was soaked, and cold to her bones, she might as well have been naked, with only a raft to herself.

A season of unchanging moon passed, or just hours, as sometimes even slumber must subside, and a river abate into mud, but does not disappear. And still the woman stood on her raft, just watching the river's end, her face and arms burnt by the diminishing river-fire, and her hair, had it been long enough, riverine in the wind. Behind her, to the east, the first fingers of dawn had begun reclaiming the sky. A little later, around her, the world began to emerge again, faintly, timidly, awash in a tentative blue light. And still the woman stood on her piece of tree, barely adrift the River of Morning, now just a ribbon of brown water ruffling over rocks and growth, and in other parts, a thick, slow-moving mass of mud. And then the woman was no longer gazing at the river's end. For night had broken open, she saw, and had revealed the first stages of sky. Around her the world had returned, a world of rocks and trees and growth, glistening in an after-wet of birth. Dead fish lay in puddles of mud. Heaps of garbage, plastic, and cans; backwaters of scum; tossed and discarded things. The bloated carcass of a cat was floating in whatever flood was still left. A lone butterfly, shocked by the loss of its orbit, was flickering in dizzied circles. The wreckage of trees, splintered branches, and uprooted trunks lay around her. But where her raft had anchored, against the bank, an elevated bank of rock, there still stood a tree. Its bank had been partly eroded, and the gnarled network of its roots exposed. The tree itself had been torn and cut in places, its bark of dried blood, peeling now in bits of scar. It had been shorn of all its leaves. But it still rose above her. It had stood its ground. Whatever remained of its branches still extended in sculptural gestures against a waterworld of new sky, and the woman just stood beneath her tree, looking up, watching, through the hierarchy of branches, the coming of morning, the first morning.