

Wash and Wear

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Every morning as she rushes out of her apartment at Adriatico corner Nakpil, he is there, holding a cab door open, always a nice, new car model, from a reputable taxi franchise. When she has a lot of things with her, he helps her stow these into the back seat, shutting the door for her, but not before telling the cab driver to drop her off at Ninoy Aquino International Airport, to pass through Macapagal and not Coastal Road, the traffic buildup already horrible even without the recent repaving of Roxas Boulevard. He would mouth, *ingat*, Samantha, through the window and smile, gesturing for her to check the locks.

She used to wonder how he knew these small details about her, but then realized her ID and blazer bore the logo of the Bureau of Customs. Now when he helps her in or out of cabs, she barely acknowledges him, settling into her seat and adjusting the volume of her headphones, or catching up on her mail and messages. For a taxi and jeepney barker, he never asked her for a tip, seemingly happy to just hang out and talk with the taxi drivers waiting in line for the next passenger. Sometimes at night, when she arrived from work, she would see him from the corner of her eye, incessantly waving as she climbed up the steps to her apartment lobby. But he is there the next day, polite and smiling, a taxi waiting for her.

Every other Wednesday, Samantha would be seen lugging a huge bag of clothes. Sometimes the barker would carry the load for her. She would step into the waiting cab, instructing the driver to double back toward Remedios Circle and make for Malvar, where Wash And Wear Laundry is. She had been sending her laundry there for three years now, and the girl working the counter already knew her, knew the specifics of her laundry; gentle wash and drip dry for her blouses and dresses, no fabric softener for her gym clothes, her jeans and slacks to be washed inside out, her underwear to be placed in the lingerie laundry bag she provided. She liked their service, liked the smell of their detergent, never had any clothes mixed in with hers, never

had clothes come back with stains, snags, or tears. Once she phoned the laundromat when she thought they had misplaced her new skirt, and she was read a detailed list of items she had sent to be laundered, the number of clothing, the sizes and labels of each piece. She felt mortified when later that night, she found the slippery silk knee-length skirt wedged between her bed and the wall.

At the counter of Wash And Wear Laundromat sits Josie, who after announcing to her mother that she had flunked out of college, was told to either go back to school or start working for a living. Josie didn't mind her job at all. Most of the time clothes were sent for pick up and delivery, and she rarely had to stand up from her perch, only had to count out change or list down items on the receipts. She loved to watch cars pass by, wondering who was driving the black Escalade, and why so heavily tinted, musing which bar it would make a stop at, who, what gender, and how many people were going for a short ride to the nearest motel. She had her noontime soaps, the horoscope book she faithfully read, and when all else failed, her Facebook profile that she refreshed every minute, counting just how many likes she received for her newly uploaded bikini photo, or what people thought of her latest love quote, her newest post musing on who so-and-so's baby daddy was.

The delivery boys, Matt and Dave, she knew, were desperately in love with her. She barely spoke to or mingled with them, but every morning, she would douse herself in cologne, would choose among her skimpiest shorts and low cut blouses, line her lids heavily with dark blue eyeliner. She enjoyed watching them squirm whenever she would call out to them to come out from the back room where they were always busy unloading, washing, folding, and sealing warm, freshly-laundered clothes into thin plastic bags. Ma'am, they would address her, even though she couldn't be more than four years older than either of them.

She would send them out on pick-ups and deliveries, would ask them to buy her a banana cue, or a Coke litro, not even the slightest bit ashamed to get Dave, the cuter of the two, to run out for some sanitary napkins when she realized she had gotten her period once. Not batting an eyelash as she handed him her soiled jean skirt and lace underwear, having tucked her shirt into some customer's towel she had wrapped around her waist, ordering him to include her clothing in someone else's load of washing, who's gonna find out, anyway? She would dismiss them with a nod of her head and turn back to whatever she busied herself with. Dave had sent her a Facebook request over six months ago, but she didn't plan on ever accepting it.

Samantha, she referred to as 14F Adriatico Heights. 14F with the mint-colored cigarette pants, wash inside out. 14F with the delicate silk blouse with pearl buttons. Please hand wash, drip dry. Real pearls, too, she knew, because she once ran a button against her teeth, felt the grittiness in texture that manufactured pearls never could duplicate. 14F with the Nike hot pink, moisture-wick sports bra and matching black, slim-fit leggings with a hot pink band running down the side. No fabric softener, please. 14F with a 25-inch waistline, the Marks and Spencer B cup bras with matching panties, wash in bag. 14F with the very same Forever 21 Aztec dress she saw Anne Curtis wearing in last month's *Preview* magazine. Gentle cycle.

Once, when 14F's clothes were ready for delivery, Josie spied the dress at the top of the pile, newly pressed, neatly folded. She asked Dave to go out and buy more detergent before he made his deliveries, we're running low on soap, do it now! She snatched the dress and stuffed it into her bag, yelling at Matt to man the counter for a while. Squeezed inside the small bathroom of the laundry mat, she removed her clothes and threw the dress over her head, smiling at herself, not caring that the XS dress pinched a little at the armpits, or that it stretched at the chest, making the breasts she was so proud of appear to have morphed into one odd lump. She had a date at Malate that night, a guy she met online who agreed to take her dancing at Coco Bananas. She decided to hold onto the dress for a while, knowing that 14F had so many clothes she would hardly miss one, knowing she could slip it back into her next batch of laundry.

Samantha's view was something to be desired. When the ad for her apartment came out, it mentioned a spacious balcony with a view of the Manila Bay. In reality, the balcony was a small space of about two-by-five feet, receiving barely enough sun for the small herb garden she was once ambitious enough to think she could sustain. She did have some view of the bay, if she moved to the right-most corner and peered around the side of her building.

What she had full view of, instead, was the five-floor covered parking lot of the mall located in front of her building. The spiraling driveway was always busy with family vans and pickup trucks and sports cars wheeling in and out of the mall. On the top floor was a row of heavy-duty central air conditioners, the rusted blades constantly whirring during mall hours, a pool of water gathering at the base of each leaking unit, the cement mossy from the constant dampness. Two cylindrical water tanks propped up on steel legs were adjacent to these, some rope, bags of cement, and plastic tubes littered beneath. Pigeons were a common sight, swooping in and out, pecking at

the cement floor, and roosting under a couple of rotten boards during the hot midday hours. One morning, as Samantha was having coffee, her eye was drawn to smoke rising from some charred wood set at one corner of the parking lot, realizing that what she had thought was a pile of junk was actually an outdoor kitchen.

She peered closer and saw among the clutter a rope hammock strung beneath one of the water tanks, a man in a sando and shorts reclined within. He would stand up and trudge toward the kitchen to lift lids and stir, pour himself a drink, and shoo some of the more stubborn birds away. Samantha ducked down when she felt eyes staring up at her, realizing that he had noticed her watching him.

Josie loved it when all eyes were on her as she danced. Mike, who remained seated nursing a Red Horse, was all right, she guessed. She had met him at the I Love The Philippines Facebook group. His profile picture showed a clean-shaven blonde standing in front of a tall building. When they met up at Coco Bananas, she barely recognized him. He was one of those backpacker types who traveled ten months of the year, sunburned from going around most of Southeast Asia, his hair and beard overgrown and unkempt. He talked about his trip through Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, telling her about the people he met and the places he visited, how he avoided the tourist traps because, that's just not real traveling, man.

He was a carpenter back in the States, and once he found out he could save his wages for a couple of months and afford to tour Asia, packed his belongings into his 32-liter Northface Yavapai and set off. Around his wrist he wore a thick stack of cord, beads, and shells he had gathered from locals and fellow-backpackers. He handed her a pink bracelet he had made, thinking especially of her, said the bright pink with the hints of orange and yellow somehow matched her aura, told her how he learned to weave thread and waxen fiber into souvenir necklaces, bracelets, and anklets at Vietnam, selling them once in a while when he ran out of money. She tuned out most of their conversation, never really caring about how he helped build an elementary school made entirely out of natural resources in Malaysia, or how he had a mushroom trip that lasted for three days wherein he locked himself up in his cheap motel room thinking that he was talking a remorseful Saddam Hussein into surrendering to the American troops, or how he was now here in the Philippines because he planned on volunteering at rebuilding homes in Leyte or Tacloban, I dunno, man, wherever I'm most needed.

When she sat back down at their table, out of breath and sweating profusely through the polyester of her Aztec dress, he asked her if she wanted to go to this beach he had read about, he was set to go in a few days. Boracay, she asked, her voice rising in excitement. No, man, I don't like the scene there. My friend went there last year and has stayed ever since. He met this chick who lives there and, basically, let's just say she's holding his money hostage now. No offense meant to you and your race, I really think you're all lovely people!

She rolled her eyes as he told her of this virgin island that you had to travel two hours via boat from Batangas Pier to get to its city proper, after which a four-hour van ride would take you to the southernmost tip of the province, where another forty-five minute ride in a boat so small it gets swallowed up by the waves finally took you to the island. How there were no hotels, just cottages, a couple of hammocks and tents for rent. How you could line fish for your meals. How the corals were rich with marine life. How sometimes you could spend a week there and hardly run into another human being. I dig that, peace and quiet. I like the idea of catching your own food, you know, realizing you have everything you need, Adam and Eve style!

She agreed to go with him, thinking he was lucky he was kind of cute, that he didn't smell too awful, that she realized she liked his facial hair, how he made Matt and Dave look like such virgins. And he kept paying for her beer, liked to watch her dance, told her she looked great. She set aside any misgivings and thoughts of how much of a snooze-fest the weekend would be, without any bars or parties or music, hoping 14F or some other customer had a bikini amongst their stash that she could borrow, something with an animal print, perhaps.

The guy at 14H moved in a few months ago. Once, while riding the elevator, he turned to her and smiled, having turned away before she had the chance to smile back. She noticed that he would be waiting for the elevator at almost the same time as her every morning, an umbrella in one hand and his bag and jacket in another, things always with him regardless of the weather. He would say hi or good morning, a stilted conversation worth fourteen flights down carried out over a series of rides. What's your name? Samantha. Ben. His hand was warm when he shook hers. You're with the customs bureau, after he spied her ID. Yes. Any contraband shit come through your way? Mostly, no. *Bagoong*. Some plants. Some rare shells. Once we had to confiscate three tubs of homemade ube jam, because it was too dense for the X-ray. Cool! My workmates fought over who would bring the *ube* home.

He would usually ask the questions, and she would answer them, curious about him but never gathering the courage to ask. She noticed he wore a company lanyard and realized he worked for Unilever. His umbrella was black and beaten up, the faded letters spelling Subic Clark Bay barely visible, causing her to wonder if he lived there at one point, or if he just visited, or if it was a gift from someone from there. She noticed, once, that his right foot was bound in micropore tape when the back of his pants leg hitched up as he picked up his bag, and she wondered if he got injured while playing basketball. If he liked sports. She didn't know why she couldn't just ask questions, how he could do so casually when everything she wanted to say seemed to get caught in her throat.

One Sunday, she ran into him waiting for the elevator as she carried a week's worth of garbage outside. She almost turned back to her apartment with everything in her hands when he looked up and noticed her. Hey! Hi. That's a lot of garbage! She reddened and wondered if he noticed that she did not segregate her waste, or just how much takeout food containers she had, or how the rotten mango that sat in her refrigerator for a month had all but liquefied, and now dripped steadily through a tear in the garbage bag. He helped her with the door to the garbage chute, getting back to the hallway just as the elevator doors closed. They waited for the next available car, I was actually on my way out to have dinner. Oh, okay, have a good night. Samantha walked back to her apartment, feeling foolish when she realized that maybe he was asking her to join him.

Once Ben snuck up on Samantha just as she was taking a huge bite off her ice cream cone. Hi, I just watched the latest *Avengers* movie, have you seen it? She struggled through a mouthful of vanilla chocolate chip, trying to swallow in one gulp while wiping at the cold cream that was running down her chin. They started walking to the direction of the exit. He had his umbrella in hand, which she found funny, the front entrance of the mall directly across their apartment, that even in the holiest of storms, would leave them vulnerable to the elements perhaps no more than five or so seconds. Alone? Yes, alone, why have you never done that? Just at home. So you haven't, then. Well, it was just a lot of muscle, anyway. What kind of movies are you into? I like foreign films. *Avengers* is a foreign film last I checked, hahaha. No, not like that. I like the film *Lost in Translation*. Oh, the one where that chick Black Widow is in her underwear the whole time, yeah I think I saw 1/8th of it. Well, yes, but also where she found communication and understanding in an older, equally lonely man, how she did not realize

that she and her husband had nothing to talk about until they went to a place like Japan that made it glaringly obvious. Huh, I guess that makes sense. Do you feel that way? What way? Like no one understands you, is that why you like the movie so much? I never thought of it that way, I guess I like how you could feel just how sad she was. Yeah, she spent a lot of time looking out of windows. Well, I do that too.

They entered the elevator and she smiled when he leaned over and pushed the button for the 14th floor. So what do you see outside of your window? I see the rain coming in. I see a thin layer of clean air beneath the thicker layer of smog. I see this guy. I never pegged you as a voyeur. She said nothing until she saw he was smirking, barely ever serious. Not like that, she blushed. He lives on top of the mall parking lot. Sometimes I see him in the morning and he is lying in his hammock. And when I come home from work he is still there. I like to think he does nothing unless I check on him. He smiled. They were standing in front of her door, and he leaned over. You have ice cream right here, I've been meaning to tell you but you seemed so intent on convincing me that that chick Black Widow's Japan movie is good. He rubbed the left corner of her mouth, just beside the crease where her top and bottom lip met, roughly passing his thumb several times across it until he said ah in victory. You know, you don't have to feel alone that way. You can tell me stories about the things you think of. I like it. I would never notice the things you do. Okay. I'll see you, Samantha. Goodnight, Ben.

Ben was leaning against the wall just outside her unit when Samantha walked out the next morning. Hi! She dropped her keys as she locked her door, picking them up and then fumbling with the knob, feeling his gaze on her. I'm going away for a few days. Oh, she noticed the duffel bag at his feet. Can you do me a favor? Sure! Can you check on my pets while I'm gone? Okay. He motioned for her to follow him. They stepped inside his apartment and from the entrance, she saw a large, cloudy tank with about six small, silvery fish. She didn't notice their rows of sharp, interlocking teeth until they drew closer.

He smiled apologetically at her. I know, I know, whoops, illegal! My cousin used to own them; they were about thirty in this small pond at their place in Marikina. Well, it was typhoon season, and the pond overflowed, and this is all that is left of them, my aunt begged me to take care of them. She imagined the rest of the piranha swimming in Marikina River, maybe even making their way as far as Manila Bay, or perhaps somewhere beneath them

in the sewers. She remembered Facebook posts that went viral, about rats and snakes swimming up toilet bowls, and wondered if it were possible piranhas could survive the same journey. What do you feed them? Sometimes chicken, most of the time, these, he picked up a Tupperware at the foot of the table where the tank was set up, the see-through container showing white mice feeding on rice grains, stepping over each other, or dozing at a corner. The top was perforated, and had a smaller panel that swung open without having to peel off the entire lid, ideal for picking out one mouse at a time. I feed the fish vegetables every now and then, I like to give them a balanced diet. They only need to eat once a day, usually in the morning. I haven't fed them yet. You wanna watch? I guess.

He opened the side panel to the plastic container and scooped up one of the more energetic mice, setting it into the tank. Initially, the piranha ignored it as it swam and bobbed around, its feet and tail thrashing in the water. One of the fish swam up to take a nip from its toes and the mouse struggled, making the fish dart away. Soon, another had a go at it, taking a bite from its tail this time. As more and more blood seeped into the water, more and more fish took notice, and soon the attacks came, one after the other, one fish dragging the mouse down and the others feeding, the mouse kicking free and making for the surface, only to be pulled down again, until there was no more struggle, only a group of fish picking at the carcass. And then calm, the piranha separating, each going to their own corner of the tank.

When he turned to her, she forced a smile. You know, they're actually not as lethal as their reputation makes them out to be. They're pretty tame, except when there is a lack of food, when that happens, the weakest of their kind get picked off. Nature, huh? They left his apartment and stood waiting for the elevator. He asked her would she mind if they shared a ride to the airport?

Outside, the barker had a cab waiting, as usual, but he was quiet this time, did not greet her nor give instructions to the driver, which she was too distracted to notice, anyway. On their way to the airport, Ben did most of the talking. Don't worry if the tank gets cloudier than usual, I can handle that when I come back next week. Okay. Thank you so much! All the while, her hand was inside her purse, her fingers playing with the set of keys he had given her, their weight on her palm, making her both excited and nervous.

Josie told Mike to fetch her at the lobby of Adriatico Heights, letting on the first time they met that she lived in an apartment with her younger siblings, and so no, he could never spend the night, they're busy studying and

cannot be distracted, but we can hang out at your hostel, instead. She was quite surprised that once they entered Friendly's Backpacker Inn, he did not make any move to touch her. Instead, he took out the rolled up sleeping bag that was attached to his pack and set it on the floor. She had been laid out on his small cot, had arranged herself in a pose that she hoped looked enticing. When he bent over and kissed her cheek good night before turning in, she lay awake in bed, puzzled. She knew that foreigners who came to Malate expected something out of the women they met, that's what her friend who worked at the perfume department of the mall told her, anyway. Get a new wardrobe but expect to spend the night with your clothes off. She thought the amount of food and drinks she had cost him would be at least worth a blowy.

Their succeeding dates since Coco Bananas revolved around cafes tucked in small, dirty alleyways; museums with several floors dedicated to old paintings that Josie could not stand to stare at for more than ten seconds, casting dirty looks at Mike who stood there with his mouth open as he shook his head. Check out the strokes, look at the contrasts, man, this shit is heavy. I used to paint a bit, you know? Nope. He knew Philippine politics, asked her take on current events. She wanted to talk about Taylor Swift and Katy Perry. She wanted to know how many celebrities he had as friends. He would smile and play with her hair, oh, Josie!

The guard glanced at her when she entered Adriatico Heights, watched her sit down, then turned back to the newspaper set in front of him. She sat on one of the sofas arranged at the lobby, nervously looking around, fixing her skirt, adjusting her position on the leather that stuck to the sweat of her thighs, looking up then away every time the elevator doors opened.

In her bag, nestled between her towel and toiletries, was 14F's tribal two-piece, something she filched off the freshly laundered pile when Matt and Dave were not looking. Topshop, hand wash, do not wring, drip dry. The suit looked new, even had the plastic barbs from the clothes tags still attached to it. She knew 14F had the habit of sending for her laundry during Mondays, confident she had plenty of time to clean the suit up before delivery. She was more worried about 1952 Mabini Street, a relatively newer customer whose schedule she was not familiar with, but whose backless leopard and zebra print maxi dress she could not resist.

Mike went up to the lobby entrance, and she hastily grabbed her things and met him as he was walking in. He hugged her at the doorway, and she was surprised at how pleasant it felt. Can we take a jeep to the bus station?

I've always wanted to try them out! Dreams of cabs with the air conditioning at full blast died at his words and she shrugged, pulling away, sure. She came face to face with 14F, who was walking with a man. 14F's eyes flickered in recognition, she nodded hello to Josie before following her companion into a waiting taxi. The man was carrying a large duffel bag, and Josie guessed they were going somewhere romantic, Boracay or Baguio or someplace that had people and restaurants and music and fancy hotels. Mike smiled at her. Are you ready?

Samantha fought the urge to enter his apartment when she got home from work that day, not really knowing why, perhaps as a test on self-restraint. The first morning that she ventured in alone, she had a hard time picking up a mouse and feeding it to the fish, something she did not anticipate when he had asked the favor off her, maybe because she was too overwhelmed with being inside his house for the first time, maybe because of the piranhas themselves, or maybe a bit of both. She fretted for a few minutes, pacing around the kitchen and living room, opening doors and cupboards, before deciding on donning the rubber gloves she found underneath the kitchen sink. She grabbed at the body of the nearest mouse, felt it wriggle, the warmth and its quick heartbeat even through the thick rubber barrier, and she threw it into the tank, closing the lights and locking up without staying to watch.

The next morning, she stayed a little longer, and even longer the following day, getting up earlier, crossing the hall in her pajamas, and opening the door with her key. She looked at the framed pictures in the living room, mostly mountains she mused Ben had climbed. He looked liked a climber, like someone used to nature. There was a photograph that stood out to her, one of a theme park at night, this particular one located above a boardwalk, the water below reflecting the lights coming from the Ferris wheel, the rollercoaster, and various other rides. She wondered who had taken the picture, if it were Ben, or his companion. It seemed to have been taken in another country, and she wondered if he had been abroad at one time, whom he had visited, who sat beside him at the rides. She thought theme parks were always romantic, and the fact that this photo was blown up, framed, and now hanging on his wall surely meant something.

She rummaged through his pantry and refrigerator, making herself some coffee, cooking eggs, and buttering some bread before putting them into the toaster. She fed the fish and sat down to eat breakfast, choosing a seat she assumed would be opposite the one he usually occupied, smiling, liking how everyone, even the mice in the small Tupperware box, was busy eating.

That night, when she could not sleep, she padded over to Ben's apartment, locking up behind her, trying the door to his bedroom, mildly surprised to find it unlocked, wondering how if the situation were reversed and she had left her house keys to him, if she would be so careless as to do so without locking the door to her bedroom. After all, she had no business in there, she knew that. She was just supposed to feed his fish.

His room was clean, the furniture sparse. He had a bed off to one corner, a small television mounted on the wall, a study table with a desktop computer opposite it. His closet was neat, the polo shirts, jackets, and pants all hung up, the rest folded by color and kind. She picked up one of his pajamas and as a joke tried it on. She walked to his bathroom, looking for a mirror, and had to laugh at her reflection. She picked up his comb and ran it through her hair, smelled his perfume, accidentally putting her nose too close to the small opening that the liquid lingering at the mouth of the bottle stuck to her flesh, making her sneeze. She washed her face, using the facial wash sitting next to the razor. She hesitated when she picked up his toothbrush, shook her head and set it down. She wiped the sink and the counter dry, rearranging everything as best as she could from memory.

She walked back into his bedroom and stared at the bed, the covers neatly tucked in, the pillows fluffed. Hers, back at her own apartment, was and always is unmade. She didn't have a systematic schedule as to when to change the sheets, most of the time only doing so when stains became too apparent. She sat at one corner and liked the spring to the mattress, checked the clock and decided it was still early, just 10 PM, and her favorite talk show was about to go on. She switched the television on, propped the pillows up, and settled in, pulling the blanket up to her chin. The next thing she knew, it was morning. But it was okay, it was almost time to feed the fish, anyway.

She walked into the kitchen, remembering that she spied some cereal in one of his cupboards; smiling as the pants legs of Ben's pajamas swished with her every step.

The trip, as Josie had predicted, was a disaster. Mike seemed to get excited by just about anything, kept taking photographs, standing from his seat and crossing the aisle to shoot the trees, mountains, churches, traffic jams, even the people; the vendors carrying puppets, toy helicopters with rotors that operated by tightening and releasing a wound piece of rubber band, cheap knock-off shades, candies, nuts, iced drinks, and cigarettes; the jay walkers; the idle traffic enforcers with their uniform shirts stretched tight across their

protuberant stomachs. He kept saying check that out, man, his eyes wide, his face flushed. He tried everything, boiled quail eggs that sold for ten pesos, *chicharon* drowning in spicy vinegar, *macapuno* candy, hotdogs sliced to resemble telephone cords coiled around a barbecue stick, soggy with oil. He talked to everyone, the conductor, the driver, the people seated opposite them, hi, I'm Mike, it's my first time here! Where should we eat when we get to Batangas? Is Tagaytay something we should visit or should we just skip it? I saw this video of children swimming in the flooded streets of Quiapo after a storm, wild! My flight to Tacloban is in two weeks; I plan on staying there maybe two months.

She didn't like the way people looked at her when Mike spoke to them, would force a smile, would turn up her music. She wrinkled her nose at all the food he was eating, saying she wasn't hungry, the bag of chips the couple across them so nacho cheesy she could almost taste it.

The van ride was no better, people squeezed together four to a row, with an air conditioner that barely did anything for the heat. She was feeling sticky, and every time Mike shifted in his seat, every time the van turned a sharp corner, she could feel his sweat on her skin, the hair on his arm warm and moist. Mike was laughing the whole way. This is wild, he kept shaking his head, wild! By the time they were in the small, motored boat headed to Tambaron Island, Josie had been sitting beside him for eight hours. She had stopped pretending she was having fun and ignored him when he pointed out tiny islands they passed, driftwood, and schools of fish that swam beneath them in the clear water. Mike seemed perfectly all right conversing with TonTon, their hired boatman and tour guide for the next few days.

As soon as they had checked into their cottage, she changed into her bathing suit and told Mike he can go island hopping all he wanted, she was going to work on her tan.

Ben had called her up twice since he had left, asking her how things were, and were his fish eating? I'll be back on Saturday. Sitting in his living room, or answering his call as she was in his bed, she felt a little guilty. She surveyed his house, at how quickly she had nested, at how sleeping and waking and eating and moving around in it easily came to her. She wondered how she was going to clean it all up and go back to her apartment when everywhere she looked, she already saw a bit of herself in it.

She slowly started straightening things out, somehow feeling sad with every plate she washed, every pillow she righted, with every crumb, lint, and

piece of hair that she swept up, feeling as though she were erasing every trace of herself and her imagined week with Ben.

She went to the mall to replace the groceries that she had depleted, passing a Mr. Quickie on her way back. She stood outside the store for a few minutes before walking in to have Ben's keys duplicated. The grooves of the metal dug into her thumb as she fit the newly-made keys in among the rest of her set.

Josie and Mike were in TonTon's boat, Mike in complete diving gear, I hear they have underwater caves here, want to go diving with me? Josie waved the gossip magazines she had brought along in his face and muttered she would rather read in the boat. The hike she had to endure the day before was already enough torture to last throughout the trip, her thong plastic slippers with their three-inch wedges sinking into the mud, her feet making sucking noises with every step she took. He gently reminded her she should have brought hiking footwear when she slipped on a patch of wet grass, and it was all that she could do not to throw her slippers at him. TonTon was silent the entire trip; he guided them through the mountains, helped them catch and grill fish for dinner, slept in his boat during nights. He didn't address her, only spoke to Mike quietly about plans and updates, always looking up at the sky and commenting on the expected weather for the day.

Josie was not amused. Here she was, dressed and fully made up, huge hoop earrings swinging with each step she huffily took, and Mike was too distracted to notice, and if ever TonTon did, he was too quiet to let it on. At the top of the mountain was a pool of water that TonTon said came from a hot spring. Mike immediately jumped in, shoes and cap still on, and Josie watched as he kicked and splashed and stirred up dirt from the bottom. TonTon, she observed, was slower, his movements more calculated. He peeled his sweat-stained shirt off, and Josie could not help but notice that although Mike was just as lean, TonTon's body appealed to her as more manly, the dents and curves more pronounced. He dove cleanly into the water, barely making the surface ripple. She removed her maxi dress, the bottom caked with drying mud, a small snag where she caught it in some thorny bushes, and gingerly stepped into the water, Mike swimming over to join her, scooping her up in his arms and guiding her to the middle of the pool. She felt TonTon's eyes on her, even in his silence she thought she caught him watching.

As soon as Mike disappeared into the ocean, Josie turned to TonTon, who was looking far off into the distance. She sidled over to him, making

such a show of looking left and right to make sure they were alone, before loosening her bikini top and letting it carelessly drop onto the boat floor. By then her flesh was so brown that the tiny triangles of her unexposed breasts were a glaring contrast, her dark nipples framed in pale pyramids of flesh, screaming for attention. She applied suntan oil on her skin, slathering more and more as she hummed, concentrating on her neck, her chest, shifting her weight over to each leg as she raised the other to work the slippery liquid all the way to her toes. She sighed, arching her back and thrusting her body up to the sun. *Hay salamat, pagod na pagod na ako mag-English.* Josie opened one eye and then another, first sneaking a look then turning her whole body toward TonTon. But he was still facing the ocean, his gaze steady. Bubbles from beneath created slight ripples on the otherwise calm surface of the water. She could already imagine the stories Mike would share of what he saw underwater. He had hinted at her coming along to Tacloban, how he held her hands in his tight grip as he mentioned the idea to her. All she could think about was how she was running out of clothes. How Dave and Matt were probably subject to hot accusations of mixing and misplacing clothes. How 14F or 1952 Mabini Street were complaining. Josie sat upright and fitted her bikini top back on, wishing she were back at Wash and Wear, anywhere else, really. She wanted to upload the photo album she was putting together, the coy captions as to who Mike and TonTon were already solid in her head. But there was no cellular signal in Tambaron Island.

On Saturday, Samantha stayed in her apartment, nervously playing with Ben's keys as she waited for his arrival. Her work had ended at seven. Throughout the day, she kept checking his flight to see if any delays or changes have been made, knowing that no matter how long she took finishing her paperwork or readying her tasks for the next day, his 9:30PM flight from Davao was still a long way away. When she alighted from her cab, she distractedly waved away the barker who repeatedly offered to help carry her things.

Ben was at her door just after midnight, and she pounced at it the moment she heard him knocking. Hi! Hi, this is for you. He thrust a plant into her hands. It was squat, with several branches extending out into long, thin, leaves. Among the leaves drooped two small, perfectly-forming mangoes. Ben laughed, it's a bonsai! I met this guy at Davao who turns everything you can imagine into a bonsai plant. He even had a tiny durian tree! You got this through Customs? I placed it in one of the empty Golden Fruits pomelo boxes I bought. They barely even checked my things. Are you mad? When

she didn't speak he continued rapidly, I'm sorry, I wouldn't have minded one but if they told me I couldn't bring the plant on the plane, but nobody even really cared. I guess you won't understand, but, seeing as it affects your job, I thought maybe you would find it funny, or at least informative. He reached for the plant, but she held onto it. No, I think I understand. He smiled, it's going to need a lot of sunlight and frequent watering. Oh, my balcony doesn't really get enough sun. Really? Maybe I could check it out. It's too dark out now. Oh, hahaha, I meant tomorrow morning. Thanks, she imagined the both of them standing at her balcony early the next day, maybe having some coffee, shoulder-to-shoulder as they bent low, the two of them spying on the man who lived under the water tanks at the mall parking lot.

She realized his house keys were still in her palm and she shifted the plant to hand it to him, but he shook his head. It's a duplicate. I actually had one made for you before my trip. When she reddened, he smiled, stooping down and handing her the bag of groceries she had carelessly forgotten to shelf in her worry at making certain his apartment was exactly the way he had left it, the receipt and credit card slip with her signature still stapled to the plastic.