The Conjugal Visit

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SHE ARRIVES HOME at seven o'clock, later than expected. She rings the doorbell twice before a maid goes out to open the pedestrian gate. Like other houses on this street, this one built by her in-laws is surrounded by high walls topped with shards of broken glass. But unlike the project houses that line this end of Bugallon Street, the two-storey house stands on the rubble of the old bungalow that came with the lot, higher than the rest. The front door is wide open. Colored lightbulbs strung across the house's grey stone facade shine bright and gaudy, and the light spills out to the small bridge over the koi pond, the bonsai garden, and onto the dark street. Pots and pans being washed in the dirty kitchen can be heard, cutting through the blare of a neighborhood's worth of televisions showing the same prime-time melodramas and American cop shows. The car is already in the garage: everyone else is home.

She hears the baby crying even when she is still several houses away. She hurries through the open gate and over the small bridge, her full and aching breasts leaking at the sound of her son's shrill voice. These lights have been kept on for her, so the moment she steps into the house, the maid flicks the switch and the scene outside is plunged in darkness. She picks up her baby from the crib, smiles at her in-laws in the living room, and carries him into the small library to nurse. She settles into a leather

chaise longue. The baby quiets down as soon as he latches on to her nipple. He sucks ferociously, so great is his hunger, but she is used to the pain.

She turns on a lamp. It is only bright enough for her to read the spines of the books in her father-in-law's library. Volumes on corporate law occupy an entire high shelf. Books on human resources and management principles line a few more. A wide desk with swivel chair and filing cabinet occupy almost half of the small room. Between the black rotary telephone and the old Olympia typewriter lies a stack of stationery for the Personnel Managers' Association of the Philippines and letter envelopes with the Employers' Confederation of the Philippines logo. Empty Parker and Sheaffer fountain pens, dried up Kilometrico ballpens, and freshly sharpened pencils stand in a dusty *Manila Times* mug.

When she breathes in the smell of old books in this room, she feels the same way she does after hearing the final Amen in mass: something has ended, something else is about to begin. She transfers the baby to the other nipple a few minutes later to ease the pressure in her other breast. Soon enough, the baby falls asleep. She goes out and puts her son back in the crib in the middle of the sala.

Taking off her shoes, she says hello to the four teenaged boys sprawled in front of the television, whose hulking darkwood cabinetry dominates one end of the living room. Her brothers-in-law wave vaguely in her direction but keep their eyes on the TV screen, where a loud explosion sends a troop of American GIs running out of some tropical jungle. At three months old, the baby somehow manages to sleep through the blasts of artillery fire and the screams of dying soldiers coming from the television.

Her father-in-law is sitting on the large couch at the other end of the sala, his feet propped up on a leather ottoman. He has been making notes on the margins of the day's papers, for one of the many letters to the editor he sends out each week. Headlines report that a national referendum will be called, where *barangay* voters will determine whether martial law should continue. The armed forces are confident their hunt for Kumander Dante will yield favorable results: it is only a matter of time before he is arrested. In the open book beside him, her father-in-law has heavily underlined a section of the Geneva Convention on the humane treatment of war prisoners. The bulk of the newspaper, made up of classified ads in tiny print, already lines the bottoms of the bird cages in the aviary.

The paper's lifestyle section is spread out on the white terrazzo floor, where her younger sister-in-law, who is twelve and used to being the baby of the family, is clipping out grainy black-and-white photos of socialites and celebrities. In an open scrapbook, cutouts of Prince Andrew, Prince Edward, and Robert Redford mingle

with Aurora Pijuan, Margie Moran, Gloria Diaz, and high society models wearing Moreno, Salazar, and Caballero. Instead of Elmer's glue, the girl uses a cornstarch paste cooked by one of the maids.

Her mother-in-law reclines on another couch, still wearing her powder blue public school teacher's uniform. Legs up, a Bible open on her lap, her mother-in-law works a toothpick through some stubborn bits of dinner stuck between her teeth. She is reading from the Book of Psalms, and her greying hair is done up in the curlers she wears to bed every night. At the dining table, her older sister-in-law is almost done eating, the blazer she wears to work in Makati draped over the back of her dining chair.

They all look at her expectantly, but it is her mother-in-law who sits up and asks the question: "How did the interview go?" Another blast of machine gun fire erupts from the television in the sala. She touches the hands of her in-laws to her forehead and takes a chair at the dining table. She tells them: "Better than expected." Work officially starts on Monday but when the lifestyle editor discovered she lived so close to Cubao, she was assigned to cover an event at Imelda's favorite luxury department store right after the interview.

She takes an envelope from her purse and hands it to her mother-in-law. Inside are gift certificates for use in the department store's supermarket, enough for a week's worth of groceries. The daughters exclaim at the fancy perks of her new job, the mother-in-law smiles and tucks the envelope into her Bible. She stands up, stoops to kiss her daughter-in-law on the forehead, and says, "Well done, *balasang ko*."

Because another box of vegetables and preserved meat has just arrived by *pao-it* from relatives in Laoag, the plates of food set aside for her at the table are more generous than usual—*inabraw* with clams, fish *paksiw*, slices of *bagnet*, finely chopped KBL or *kamatis-boggoong-ken-lasona*. But she has already eaten. The food at the event was catered by a Blue Lady. Her father-in-law nods but says nothing, goes back to his newspaper and his notes. She is glad they don't need to talk over the sounds coming from the television.

She carries her sleeping baby up to their bedroom, the largest on the second floor, the nearest to the bathroom. It is the second best room in the house, after the master's bedroom. During the day, the room stays cool from the shade of the *makopa* tree outside and the evaporation from the lily pond right below their window. A maid follows her with freshly sterilized feeding bottles and a breast pump.

The baby is tucked in, snuffling softy and surrounded by pillows. So much preparation must be made for tomorrow before she herself can turn in. She dictates

her article notes into a tape recorder while pumping milk. The luminaries at the event and what they wore, the tidbits of food doled out by wait staff. She squeezes the breast pump's rubber bulb, feeling the strain in the network of muscle, cartilage, and bone that make up her wrist. Thin white fluid dribbles bit by bit into the small plastic bottle, the rising level marked by milliliter lines painted on the sides: 10 ml, 15 ml, 20 ml, and so on. Finally, she fills three bottles and proceeds to feed a piece of paper into the typewriter at her desk. To muffle the sound, the machine has been placed on top of an old flattened throw pillow. She begins to type. Pounding away at typewriter keys, she feels the impact of each letter against the bones under the fleshy pads of her fingertips. It is now nine o'clock, nearer to midnight and curfew than she'd like. Each keystroke sounds like gunfire.

The baby wakes up and cries. She tries to nurse him but all her milk has been pumped into the feeding bottles, so she gives him a fresh one. Thankfully, there is more than enough already set aside; she produces more milk than her infant son can take in one day. She props up the bottle with a small pillow and continues to type, needing to finish her first lifestyle article and prove she is up for the job. She finds the writing easy enough, drafting and cleaning it up in under an hour, with midnight mercifully a longer way off than expected. She tiptoes down to the kitchen to add the two new bottles to the stash in the refrigerator. It is a hulking White Westinghouse, thrumming as if it were a huge electric heart, large enough to contain the kilos of fish and vegetables required to feed this household of thirteen people. She moves quietly, avoiding loose tiles in the parquet flooring, silently flicking the glow-in-the-dark light switches on and off as she makes her way through the house.

Someone, one of the maids or a sister-in-law, has moved a few bottles of her milk from the freezer to the ref, making space for a plastic bag of *galunggong* from the market. It's just as well—the baby will have to be fed while she is away at Camp Crame the whole day. This thawing of her frozen breastmilk is a kindness, she decides, one less detail to worry about before she leaves in the morning. She goes back up to their room. The neighborhood has been quiet for a while now. A few dogs bark in the distance. Lovebirds are cooing in the aviary, the koi are splashing in the pond. In the other fish pond outside, the one with the small stone bridge arching over it, the small spear-like flower buds of the water lilies have opened in the cool night air.

Unable to sleep, she plays a recording of her son's delivery. It calms her down during these moments when she feels restless, when something doesn't feel right. More than hearing her own voice groaning from the labor pains and calling out her

husband's name, it is her husband's calm baritone that she listens for. At the most painful moment, right before she pushes her son out in a gush of blood and fluids, he tells her: "It's going to be fine, we'll be fine." This is the only recording she has of his voice. Somewhere outside, a cat in heat starts yowling. She falls asleep before curfew strikes.

Early the next morning, she wakes to the baby's cries. His face is impossibly red and veiny as he takes in noisy gulps of air that he pushes out from his tiny lungs with all the power his small body can muster. His balled fists are the size of *siniguelas*, his frog legs flexing stiffly in time with his screams. She has never seen anything so ugly in her life. And yet: she has never loved anything as much as this screaming creature, this thing that is utterly dependent on her for its survival. She calms him down with a breast that has leaked at the sound of his squalling.

This day is the first time the baby will be left in the care of her in-laws while she goes to Camp Crame for a conjugal visit. It is a Saturday, a Valentine's Day. It will be fine: Everyone else will be here at home, eager to play with the baby. After the child is burped and the diaper changed, she makes her way down to breakfast, carrying the baby and the article she had typed out the night before. She sets him down in the living room crib. He looks wide-eyed at the morning light on the ceiling, kicks his feet, and gurgles at the colors dangling from the mobile far above him, way beyond his reach.

Because everyone is home, there is never enough space at the dining table. They take turns eating. While others eat breakfast, the youngest sister-in-law plays with the baby in the sala. For a family with four teenage boys—not counting the eldest son who is away at Camp Crame—there is never enough breakfast meat. The scramble for fried meat and eggs occurs in complete silence. The lazy Susan spins slowly and the mounds of food on the platters grow smaller as each teenager serves himself more than his fair share. Late risers will have to make do with the *torta*—in which precious eggs are bulked up with potatoes or mashed eggplant. This morning, there is also a mess of cabbage-and-potatoes with wisps of corned beef to spoon over the fried rice. As the lactating daughter-in-law, she is given heaping portions of every dish served, each in its own little covered bowl or saucer, so that her place at the table is a miniature buffet of delights which, despite their GMRC lessons, the four teenaged boys would have gleefully killed to have.

Since the family cannot say grace together before the meal, each person here prays silently, with brows furrowed and eyes shut tight, hands clasped over their upturned plates. This is when she furtively makes the sign of the cross and touches the scapular under her blouse. She never prays the rosary in this house, only at work

during her lunch hour, or on the jeepney during her long commute to the Port Area in Manila, where most newspaper offices are located.

Between bites of breakfast, she writes down instructions for the youngest sister-in-law, who has volunteered to be the baby's primary caregiver for the day. In the living room, the girl bounces the baby on her lap. He is too young to sit up on his own but he enjoys this immensely, gasping and squealing so much that he burps and vomits a little milk on his young aunt's canary yellow Snoopy t-shirt. Done eating, the young wife gets up and hands her sister-in-law a crisp green five-peso bill, something to add to her allowance for helping with the baby. The girl places the money in her wallet, careful not to crease it. The brothers-in-law look at their sister with barely concealed envy for a moment before jockeying for the privilege of accompanying their sister-in-law to Camp Crame. The youngest brother offers to carry all the bags and parcels to Crame, another promises to be at the military camp's Santolan exit gate by 4:00 PM to help carry home the dirty laundry and the empty Tupperware. The other boys disappear in the flurry of things teenagers do to fill a weekend when money is tight and curfew is in place.

Her father-in-law is attending a get-together at the National Press Club, so he cannot drive her to Crame on this Saturday morning. But he can drop off the typescript of her article at the newspaper office, maybe even chat with her editors, who were his chums from way back. He had worked his way up from junior reporter at the *Daily Mirror* after the war to becoming personnel manager at the *Manila Times*, trusted by Don Chino to make sure all their workers received severance pay when martial law shut down the press. With the newspaper closed, he has returned to lecturing on industrial relations for small companies and lawyering for indigent clients despite repeated invitations from powerful friends—the labor minister, the tourism minister, the executive secretary, all of them newspaper colleagues from the postwar years—to join the government. She hands the article to her father-in-law, deeply grateful she can give him a reason to see old friends again.

It takes two jeepney rides to commute from the house to Camp Crame—the first goes to Cubao where they wait for another jeepney going to Murphy. At Santolan, they get off right in front of Camp Crame's gate. They cross the street carefully because of the many bags they have to carry. Her youngest brother-in-law is fourteen. He is the gentlest when it comes to handling the baby, the quickest to take the heavy bags from her whenever she arrives at the exit gate of Camp Crame at exactly 4:15 PM, ready to go home. He is the only one in the family who openly cries whenever they visit his eldest brother on certain Sundays after church, at the detention center called Stockade 4, where political prisoners are kept. He cannot

stand seeing his *manong* in jail but, among his siblings, he is the one who visits most often. He makes sure his sister-in-law is okay before making the trip back to Project 4.

From the Santolan gate, she sees an older couple, some twenty yards away. They will be right ahead of her at the first security checkpoint, the last ones standing in a queue of people waiting to be let into Stockade 4. Both appear to be in their late fiftes. The man is thin and balding, with a disproportionately round paunch. He is a head taller than his plump wife, who has a liking for animal print. They both look a little rumpled, as they have traveled a long way to get there, all the way from Isabela. She knows exactly what they will write in the log books after their names. Under RELATIONSHIP: Parents. Under PURPOSE: Conjugal Visit. Labels and categories, like many things these days, seem utterly random, even whimsical.

The old couple turns and sees her approaching. The older woman looks away, the old man nods. They, too, are burdened with too many bags and parcels that will be opened several times before they are allowed to see whoever they've come to visit. She keeps walking in their direction, then stops. Near enough for her to look them in the eye, far enough so that neither can initiate a handshake or any other form of physical contact. The muscles on their faces collapse a little as they turn back to the guards in front of them. The older man clears his throat and speaks a little too loudly when the soldier manning the gate asks a question. Usually, she tries to get through security as quickly as possible. Today, she allows the soldiers to take their time. She is in no hurry to see again the older couple trudging ahead of her. She walks through the security gauntlet slowly, thankful that the couple's son is being kept in a different part of Stockade 4. Despite everything this old couple had said about her husband, even after their testimony resulted in his arrest, it seems the military did not keep their end of the bargain.

Carrying her overnight duffel and the Tupperwares of food lovingly prepared by her mother-in-law, she goes through a kind of obstacle course of security measures. It is less about walking past a phalanx of soldiers and more like walking through a labyrinth of barriers, barbed wire, and hollow block walls. At seven different checkpoints, uniformed guards ask her to present identification and sign logbooks which all ask for the same information. They use the same kind of record books wielded by public schoolteachers—thick, hardbound, with greyish paper so thin that ink often bleeds through to the next page. They make her write with cheap ballpens that either skip or blot. Whenever she uses her own ballpen, they ask to keep it. She gives it to them. They always thank her politely. Seven times, she writes the same

words and phrases. Aside from her name and her husband's, she must indicate a number of things. Under DESTINATION: Stockade 4. Under RELATIONSHIP: Wife. Under PURPOSE: Conjugal Visit.

Flashing her press ID does little to speed up the process. If anything, it feels as if the soldiers manning the security posts move more slowly when they see the word PRESS on her plastic-covered identification card. Sometimes they talk about what they would like to have for *merienda*. More often, they make raunchy jokes about what their comrades on furlough could be doing at that very moment. When this happens, it seems as if every leering eye at the checkpoint is on her. Of course, it could just be her imagination. The heat of the day makes her long for the small, cramped rooms that lie at the other end of the compound, in Stockade 4. Anywhere but here. She wipes the sweat from her neck and forehead, shifts her heavy bags to the other shoulder and arm. She walks briskly despite this unseasonably hot morning. She can feel their eyes on her, even as she walks to the next checkpoint. After the sixth, she will be stopped a few more times.

The last security point is the one she dreads the most. There, a woman in uniform greets her, "Good morning, ma'am. Please put all your things on the table." She follows instructions so that the woman in uniform can open and examine every bag, every pocket, every container. The woman in uniform is not always the same person, but she always speaks in a calm, measured voice. The woman in uniform always smiles politely when directing the young wife to a curtained-off corner where the woman in uniform inflicts a thorough and methodical strip search upon her. Every part, every orifice, is examined and prodded. Here, she pretends she is at the doctor's. She knows she cannot do or say anything out of the ordinary. She quiets herself and complies. This is for her own good. This is for her husband's safety and well-being.

The room is small and dimly lit, with an incadescent bulb casting faint shadows on plywood and hollow-block walls. It is just like all the other rooms she has had to enter since coming through the gates of Camp Crame this morning. She shivers in the gloom, a world away from the blazing heat outside. She wonders how many times she has been in this room since her husband was arrested. She counts off these weekend visits in her head. She counts the pieces of furniture in the room. She looks for other things to count until, finally, the woman in uniform lets her go. She will soon be allowed to see her husband. But first—a series of narrow corridors made up of walls-within-walls and gates-within-gates, all spiralling inward, into the center of Stockade 4. It is like entering a set of nested Chinese gift boxes, or an Escher drawing, except the whole complex structure is layered with large coils of barbed wire.

On this day, he waits for her at the red gate, the one directly under the largest guardhouse. What she sees from her end is a massive riveted barrier, red paint peeling away from the surface in uneven strips. A narrow metal door swings open on rusted hinges. She goes through it, and he is there. He takes the bags and holds her hand as they walk through another gate that has been opened for them. They walk together, down the dark corridors that take them deeper into the center of the maze.

It is hard to tell how large or how wide the building actually is. When passing through so many walls and gates, it is difficult to gauge a building's dimensions. But it is a low, a one-storey affair built mostly out of hollow blocks and corrugated iron sheets. The only iron bars here are at the small windows that look out onto other hollow-block walls, which are close enough so that a prisoner standing at the window can reach out and touch that other wall. This wall is just one of the many layers that lie between this world and the one outside. Several meters above their heads, armed guards trace the perimeter of this world on a catwalk.

The interior space is divided into small rooms by *lawanit* plyboard and two-by-fours. They are more like cubicles, with bunkbeds in them instead of desks. The prisoners call them *kubol*, which means a makeshift shelter, like a shed. But here in Stockade 4, a kubol is a place they can call their own, a private space they can escape to if they wished. There are a few who almost never leave their safe spaces. They are the ones who grow thin as the weeks and months pass, the ones who do not join in the singing or the chess games. There are doorways but no doors; above each kubol's doorway is a length of metal wire whose ends are coiled around nails hammered into the doorway's two-by-fours. A prisoner can hang a sheet or a towel on this wire to make a kind of curtain. Everyone respects the finality of a closed curtain.

The roommate has turned his blanket into a curtain for the conjugal visit. He is somewhere else today, perhaps enjoying a game of chess in another kubol. Someone else has lent them a small transistor radio. It is on the floor beside the bed, along with a pair of new batteries. Her husband holds the curtain open for her. She enters. He follows her in. The curtain drops behind them. He turns on the radio and music starts to play, just loud enough to drown out the world.

Hours later, over a lunch of *dinengdeng*, adobo, and white rice scented with knotted pandan leaves, she tells him about her new job. How the interview had gone, how she covered an event at the luxury department store in Cubao. There had been a few Blue Ladies in attendance, but thankfully Imelda wasn't there. He takes a sip of water, slowly putting the glass back on the table.

"Is this what you really want?" he asks. "To write about perfumed women and their shopping habits?"

She shrugs. "It's a living," she says. One that will let her spend a little more time with the baby. Maybe this new job will make the military ease up on their surveillance of her as the wife of a political prisoner. Because of course there is always someone following her around. No need to wait anymore at police stations or follow the cops around the city looking for stories, the way she had to when she was still on the police beat. They get more perks in the lifestyle section too: companies are always dropping off product samples and vouchers. In fact, she wants to say, she already got two gift certificates the night before, enough for an entire week's worth of groceries. His mother could do with more of those, especially with the rice shortage getting worse and a recent typhoon destroying the vegetable harvest in Baguio.

She clenches and unclenches her hands under the table, flexing her wrists and fingers the way she does when in the middle of a writing project.

He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. He nods and agrees it's for the best. For now, while he's still in here. "As you say, any help we can give to Mama and Daddy will be much appreciated."

She decides to bring up the bruise she had noticed on his chest that morning. He hasn't mentioned anything done to him by his captors recently, but there is no mistaking that faint purple mark which is beginning to have tinges of green at the edges. He flinches every time she touches it but does not say anything. He knows what is coming and quietly tells her: "It's nothing, don't worry about it."

Four in the afternoon comes too soon for everyone in this building. Those living inside and those who visit them always wish for the hours to pass more slowly. The ones charged with opening and closing the many concrete layers separating this place from the world outside would rather the hour doesn't come at all. There are always too many bags of dirty laundry and parcels to be opened and inspected, all at the same time. Visitors always move sluggishly, unwilling to leave their husbands or sons behind.

Every single day, at least one of the guards will say out loud: "If they don't want to leave, can't we just all lock them in and be done with it? They all want to be together naman, di ba? They are all the same—*mga komunista*, the lot of them!"

Seen from above, from the guards' catwalk, the whole place is a maze of walls and gates and coils of barbed wire—Stockade 4 must look like a concrete-and-metal cabbage whose leaves are slowly being pried open so that the maggots crawling about, unwilling to leave, can be plucked off one by one.

In the past few months, she and her husband have learned that it is better to pack things away early, hours before 4:00 PM when all visitors are required to leave. At half past one, as she feels the weight of her milk pressing down against her rib

cage, she realizes she has left the breast pump at home. Her husband notices her cupping her breasts to counter the pain of engorgement. He clears the bunk bed quickly and makes her lie down.

He unbuttons her blouse and begins suckling at her heavy breasts. He drinks slowly, alternating between her two breasts, sucking at one nipple then the other, all the while massaging the base of the fleshy mounds, to ease the pressure from the glands. He stops. He raises the thin pillows against the wall and has her recline on them, to make her more comfortable. He brushes her hair back gently from her face and continues at his task. She catches a warm watery drop from her left nipple with her fingertip and brings it to her mouth. She marvels at how sweet the milk tastes, almost sugary in its intensity. She strokes her husband's hair, drawing her nails softly from his shoulders down to his back over and over again.