

Camouflage

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THE CAMOUFLAGE PANTS bothered me. Shirley said it's fine, it's just a phase, but I wasn't sure. I wasn't there when Camille bought them, and apparently neither was Shirley, but I guess Camille now hates having her mother with her when she shops for clothes. Camille is at that age when she realizes she's too much like her parents, and she does everything in her power to make herself different, even if it kills her, or you. Not giving me a good morning kiss I had to accept. Your little girl giving you a good morning hug and peck on the cheek for a decade and then suddenly deciding she won't do it any more? That took some time to accept. Then sleeping over at the Gancias with her friends? It's a different world when your own daughter no longer wakes up in the morning in your house. But the Gancias are nearby, just on the other side of the village, and we know Nonoy and Beverly well, and Shirley said she used to do it at Camille's age, so I relented, even if I can barely sleep when she's away.

Now the pants. They're just a pair of pants, and not even vaguely indecent. I've seen girls her age at malls in blouses so thin you could see the color of their bra or skirts so short you tried to lengthen them with sheer will. They're barely teenagers, practically still children, for God's sake, and they shouldn't be showing off the curve of their behinds. The offending pants cover her legs entirely. And they're loose, with large pockets by the knees, and she uses them, unlike those decorative little flaps they call pockets in women's pants and skirts (if they have pockets at all, which Shirley insists is a grand conspiracy to make women buy handbags).

Maybe it's the camouflage. That pattern hasn't been in style in ages. When I was in college you'd see a few guys wear camo jackets, all of them skinny, guys with scraggly hair and goatees who looked like they lived a bathing-optional lifestyle. And only ROTC officers wore camo pants, because they needed to remind you that, even though they were the outcasts of society, they got to boss you around hot Saturday afternoons.

When Camille turned thirteen we gave her a smartphone, which she'd been begging and pleading for. We relented and got her one of those cheap Chinese brands that won't hurt if she breaks or loses it. But I also insisted on certain rules. I said, don't ever send naked pictures of yourself, or any part of yourself, to anyone. Shirley shot me a look, and Camille laughed a laugh that said, You're so hopelessly old and stupid, Daddy.

But I'm not being stupid. At about that time a high school girl sent topless photos of herself to her boyfriend, who then posted them online when they broke up. The boy's school suspended him, but Shirley said they should have expelled him. I agree. Boys get off easy with things like this. The girls are shamed for life, those photos floating forever online, for trusting someone they love. It's unthinkable, for someone you've taken into your heart to betray you like that, and then it happens. Because people can be really nasty, even those you think you know.

It took a while for her to agree to have Shirley look through her phone any time she wanted, but it was a condition we made before agreeing to the purchase. At first I said it should be both of us, but she threw a fit and locked herself inside her room. I argued it's only fair, we're going to pay her phone bills. So Shirley came up with the compromise, and she'd just tell me if anything weird came up, and so we were off to the mall to buy the phone. Later I told Shirley I should be able to look through Camille's phone too, because I know Shirley can be too soft on the kids. I didn't put it that way. I said because I'm a man, I can notice things she might not. I know how guys think. I can see past the innocent façade and recognize danger signs. She gave me a face, the one that says, There you go again.

Then we watched *Antigone*, a production at Camille's school, and it all made sense. She had been watching the cast rehearse because Melay Gancia, Camille's classmate, and Melay's older sister Regine were performing in it. It was a simplified version, and short, shorter than I remember from reading the play in college. The language was contemporary, the characters said "Yeah" and "Whatever." The sets were globs of blue and gray, suggesting endless mountains, with crude battlements of painted cardboard. The most striking thing about it was the costumes. Thebes was at war, or at least had just been in one, and King Creon was decked in battle fatigues, olive green, dark brown, and a sandy beige. But so was Antigone, funnily. It was never clear why. Was she an officer in the army? I don't remember that she was, and the show didn't tell you. Her sister Ismene was in a camouflage dress, with no sleeves and the hem just at the knee. It was the nicest touch. She seemed very pretty and feminine next to her sister, who was grim and pouty, her hair pulled up under her cap. As high school plays go, it was pretty good, with a refreshingly competent cast

(a young male teacher played the king, while everyone else was a student). The small audience gave them a spirited round of applause, but then we were mostly relatives of the performers and other members of the production. Regine Gancia played Ismene, Melay one of the chorus. Camille had watched several times and insisted that we go, and we did on its final weekend.

So my daughter is trying to look like Antigone. I get it. I'm the evil king caught in the middle, trying to impose a semblance of order on the world (or at least his tiny slice of it) while doing justice. And here comes this idealistic girl who defies him even if it means losing her life. She must do her duty and bury her brother Polyneices, her own kin, who Creon decreed should be left out in the open for defying the city and waging war upon it. By punishing his own niece, Creon demonstrates how even-handed his brand of justice is. Duty versus duty, and no one is wrong. Camille is a young girl becoming a woman, and I'm a father with responsibilities and a better grasp of how this world works and who has to impose rules she doesn't like for her own good.

But now I have questions for the writer that didn't occur to me all those years ago when we took up the play: Why does the protagonist have to be the sympathetic young girl? Why didn't he write a play about Creon? He wrote small, quiet scenes for Antigone, with her sister Ismene and the jail guard. Where are the small, quiet scenes in which the king agonizes over the hard decisions he has to make? Worse, the actor's voice was weak, tinny (it was a musical, and the music wasn't the best thing about it, just a kind of generic pop-rock that wasn't tuneful) and he played the king as a drunken lout. The director didn't care for balance.

Shirley says Camille is starting to get interested in boys. They talk when I'm not around, in the car when Shirley picks her up or when I'm late for dinner. I'm nervous, but Shirley does her best to assure me that this is all normal for girls her age. Camille exchanges messages on her phone with friends, and apparently a handful of them are of the male variety. When I suggested again that I look through her phone, Shirley said, "Give her some space, Carlo!" That's something else they didn't put in the manual on parenting. Maybe I'm using an outdated edition.

So my own daughter slowly transforms from this adorable little thing, the cutest baby in the history of the planet, the most lovable and huggable child, my life's biggest blessing, source of my deepest happiness, into a swamp mutant. I know that's not a fair characterization, but then life isn't fair. It's getting harder and harder to recognize the girl I once knew, and I know the day may come when she rejects me and everything I stand for entirely, when she turns into a complete stranger I won't even recognize, when she will bury her brother and accept the sentence of death

because it means the ultimate rejection of everything I stand for. What would be the point of being king after that?

She's finding herself, Shirley said one night, trying out different outfits and seeing what fits. That's silly, I said. We are who we already are, we simply become more like ourselves as time goes by. Everything else is a skin being shed, a costume to discard because it no longer fits. Then help her let her real self out, she said, and there was nothing I could say to that.

When her fourteenth birthday came around Camille wanted a party. Melay Gancia's birthday was two weeks later, so they decided to have it together. We hadn't had one, the kind with cakes and balloons and all that, since our daughter was a small child. Will we need to hire one of those hosts who also do magic tricks? I asked her. I see them all the time in the kiddie parties my friends invite me to. Of course Camille grimaced. "I think she's too old for that," Shirley said. So what did she have in mind? The two teenagers would take care of it, with Shirley's help, and I wasn't allowed into the inner circle.

So the day comes. We left the Civic out on the street and laid out long plastic tables on the driveway. Late in the afternoon it arrived, the hesitant, not-yet-confident parade of youths no longer children but aren't quite adults. Trying out costumes they've been told—by billboards and magazines, TV and movies, the Internet, well-meaning friends, the whole swirling maelstrom they've been thrown into and are expected to stay afloat in—will fit them.

Most of the boys were in slim, leg-hugging walking shorts that ended just above the knee. Some wore boat shoes (I guess they're in fashion again), others those fancy slippers called flipflops. The girls were in skirts or denim shorts, all very short. Their blouses were sleeveless, or spaghetti strapped, or tubes like oversize rubber bands, highlighting curves that aren't quite there yet, as if the attention will shame their bodies into pushing them out.

They think they're expressing themselves, letting their individuality out, but they don't see that they're aping the images around them, trying to be like them but failing, falling into the trap the world lays for them. Music videos of women in bikinis standing around a pool. Pop songs about anacondas and milkshakes. Danger lurks everywhere.

On the highway a few minutes past the subdivision gates is a billboard with a woman in black lingerie. The model used to be on TV, one of those child actors who become grown women and sex up their image to break from their wholesome past. The tagline: This body can be yours. That's what they are, just bodies to get.

Go to the gym, wear the right clothes and makeup, and you girls will look just like the one in the billboard. For the boys, the message is more sinister: Just reach out and take this body. You're entitled. How does one raise children in this kind of world.

Camille wore the camo pants. I've noticed she doesn't wear shorts in public anymore, perhaps because she's suddenly anxious about her legs. (If they were any skinnier, she'd be anorexic, but of course she doesn't believe me.) To balance out the look she wore a sleeveless pastel top. (So did Melay, and if Camille were also in denim shorts they'd have been mistaken for sisters.) I wanted to take a shawl from Shirley's closet and wrap it over Camille's pale, bony shoulders.

Melay's sister Regine arrived later, with a handful of friends. They're older than the others by a few years, more adults than children, and they moved about with the practiced nonchalance their younger counterparts don't have. So of course the younger ones couldn't stop looking at them. Regine sported the camouflage skirt of the dress she wore as Ismene, under what looked like a white tank top she scissored at the belly. It started below a shy collarbone and fell, hanging over the gentle rise of her bosom, suspended over a taut belly, a field of clear skin. Then the skirt that blossomed toward the earth, suspended on two slim legs.

A few teachers were with them. Regine is lucky, said English teacher Anne, because she can use her costume as everyday clothes. She looked barely out of college and just like one of those short, plumpish girls destined to be the sidekick of the more attractive.

The man who played Creon was here too, the one they called Sir Eric. He is three years out of college and teaches Math in the grade school. In fact, he was teaching so that he could be near the student theater scene, which he admits he can't let go of. He's been acting since high school.

Regine and her friends took over the garden set, her low metal seat holding her like an offering in a cupped hand. Just as I looked her way from inside the kitchen, she rose, and the skirt fluttered, and I glimpsed the bright tops of her thighs and a flash of pink fabric above them.

I made myself useful during the day, helping with the food and drink, welcoming arrivals, and escorting departures to the gate. I never let Regine out of my sight, and neither did Eric.

Then September came and shook up our lives. A nasty typhoon hit the city in the early hours of a Saturday, and it rained and rained and rained. We'd never seen anything like it before. Luckily for us, we were all at home. I'd slept in as I usually do,

and I woke up only because of the nonstop rain. It had started when I went to bed just after midnight, and it was still pouring when I got up.

Nonoy Gancia spent the night in his Makati office and was driving home that morning. He never made it. The car got stuck in a massive jam on EDSA, just on the edge of a flooded underpass. So he left it by the side of the road then walked the rest of the way to this subdivision on the border between Quezon City and Marikina. Two streets away from the subdivision gate, where the main road turns into the narrow street that leads here, the floodwater had reached chest high, and the water swirled treacherously around a street corner down the main avenue. Someone had strung a length of rope from one post to another, to help people make the last few hundred meters to the gate, where the water was only a few inches deep. It seems Nonoy was there, pulling himself along with six or seven other people, when the rope snapped. The current swept them all away. They had been smashed against the perimeter wall and killed more or less instantly. When the water receded, their bodies were found glossy with mud, just like the stray dogs nearby. I don't know what was more amazing, the sight of those bronze, glistening bodies or the cars stacked on each other as if left there by giants with dementia.

We visited Beverly at the wake a few times and attended the funeral. As the priest spoke over the casket on that bright and sunny morning, I was grateful, as I suppose everyone was, for having a body to bury and no prohibition against burying it, and for having religious rites to perform over it to send the soul peacefully into the next world and the living peacefully back into this one. Memories came to me, of Nonoy gliding on the basketball court, a dark stocky figure who needed only his fingertips to flick the ball to teammates, his floppy socks bunching around the ankles of his trainers (he was the first among us to have them). The sleepy eyes flickering awake as he emerged from a nap, the class giggling, the nonplussed teacher without a clue. His square-jawed face, the eyes goggling, as we huddled over magazines with images of naked women only too willing to open their secrets to us in the dark intimacy of a restroom stall. The wink as he aimed for Shirley's classmate Beverly ("Nice rack," he whispered to me with a smirk, when she first passed us by on the way to the buffet table) at a college party. The wide forehead, before the hairline receded and he shaved his head to make himself look dignified, then the goatee. The wedding, baptisms, the kiddie parties, the birthday lunches and dinners. Someone handed me a rose, and I tossed it onto the coffin as it was lowered into the earth.

We helped them clean the house. Ours was near the clubhouse, the highest part of the subdivision, and only a few inches of water got into the driveway. Theirs

was lower, and four feet of water got into the living room. Shirley, the girls, and I spent two days with them with mops and rags, jugs of Zonrox, and cans and cans of Lysol.

In the days after I found myself drawn to Beverly and her daughters, protective of what was left of the family. It mattered less and less to me what happened to Shirley or Camille, but I imagined all the terrible things that might befall Beverly and Regine and Melay just so many streets away, and I woke up in the middle of the night wondering how I might slip out of this family into that one, how it might happen seamlessly, without anyone making a big deal of it. Me just disappearing from this house and this life and popping up in theirs, and everybody going on as before, a mere unstitching and restitching of the fabric of life.

Weekends we spent hours there, Shirley telling us we needed to help them get through their grief. We sat in their living room sipping iced tea while I stole glances at the girls on the patio, Camille and Melay gesturing wildly in that vivid way girls their age talk, Regine beside them but not with them, her face buried in a book. Then she wouldn't join them at all. She's upstairs, Beverly said, on her laptop, probably, chatting with her friends. Or practicing on her guitar. We'd hear the sloppy crunch of power chords and the wayward trail of melodies meandering down the stairwell. I offered to teach her, me the one-time conservatory student who once considered rock band front man a plausible career.

So one day Beverly managed to coax Regine downstairs, and she lugged her imitation Strat and small amplifier to where we were. She had changed. The pretty, willowy teen who played a sweet, guileless Ismene was gone, and ever since her father died a curt, sullen girl had taken her place. I don't know if she was happy to see me, her eyes seemed to light up a bit when I arrived, but I thought Bev was glad for my brief stints there, as Regine crawled out of her cave long enough to acknowledge the presence of other humans in the world. Bev told us she was finding it hard to reach Regine, her father's death had cut her deep, and she didn't know how to be her mother anymore.

So our lessons began, if I can call them that. They were more play-alongs, us watching tutorial videos she found on YouTube, then trying out what we'd watched. I checked her technique, which tended to be lazy. I got her to stand her fingers on the fretboard, to fret cleanly and make notes ring. I fixed her picking motion, softening her rigid up-down nudging into a smooth arc with less wasted movement.

She blurted out one day that she'd been writing songs.

"Oh?" I said. "I'd love to hear one." Then I scolded myself for sounding too excited.

Her face closed up, and she muttered that they weren't finished, she couldn't play them for anyone just yet. We returned to our lesson on the pentatonic blues scale.

When we paused we would talk music, she telling me who she was listening to, me advising whom to imitate, what songs to cover. If I asked a personal question or in any way made it look like I was probing her personal life she parried the remark and changed the subject or smothered it with cold silence.

One day I arrived late. I showed myself in as I usually do, closing the gate behind me and walking down the short driveway with my guitar case. You could already hear it from outside, and when I entered the living room it became louder. The thick, distorted wailing of a guitar washed down the staircase. Beverly said she wouldn't be home, and the first floor was empty. I crept up the steps. A door was open, and even though I hadn't reached the landing I could see her. She was standing, her back to me. Her underpants were a wisp, her camisole sheer, almost translucent. She had the milky complexion of her mother. The door obscured most of the guitar, but I could see the strap around her neck and shoulder. She hadn't heard me. I felt as if I'd stumbled upon her praying.

Then she turned. She was crying. I don't know if she saw me, her face was wet with tears, and for a moment I marveled at the apparition of this sad, beautiful creature, a vision that I should never have seen. Then she kicked the door closed. I had glimpsed Diana, and now she would turn my own hounds upon me and tear me to pieces.

In a minute she had descended, a big, long t-shirt draped over her body.

"That was beautiful, what you were playing," I mumbled.

She walked past me and said nothing. She sat on the sofa for a full minute, but I sensed the dam was about to break. Her eyes said everything. Then she began talking, the words coming out of her in harsh flurries. Her voice was tight, as if she didn't know if she should speak slowly and clearly or let it all out. She never looked at me, just a spot on the coffee table. It seemed a good long minute that she managed to stay in control as she spoke of her father, her father, her father. Then she began to shudder. I sat and put a hand on her shoulder. The words poured out faster, louder. Then the fat, ripe tears fell, she curled into me and turned into a sobbing, moaning mess. I put my hands on her head, her neck, her back, her thigh. She kept going.

"It's okay," I said, softly, then her name, over and over. She wept without shame, and I let her, a mollusk raw and pink, its shell lost to the current.

I will protect you, you sad, beautiful thing. Like a daughter. Even if it kills me.

My marriage lasted two more years. The fabric of life didn't unstitch itself, it tore slowly as the days went by in a glum procession. Shirley left and moved in with a

sister of hers who never married and is so devout she's practically a nun, who lived in a cluster of those developments that creep ever southward, somewhere in Cavite, expanding the metropolis that seems to have no borders.

Shirley took Camille with her, putting our daughter in a school in Alabang so she could be close by and, more to the point, away from me. I didn't protest, as my daughter has seemed less my own flesh and blood than some lunar oddity. As for Shirley, I believe she wearied of me, of my imperviousness to change, of my dogged refusal to give in to her husband-improvement project. She can't bear to see that I still am the very man she married. Conveniently she was transferred from the branch of her bank in Commonwealth to one just off South Superhighway, but whether the assignment was an imposition on her or one she requested I don't know.

Shirley hasn't said it, but I think this is her version of a trial separation. Some space between us might be good, she said. When the trial period ends she didn't say, and I didn't volunteer a suggestion. How can I be a father to my daughter if she is away from me, I thought of saying, but I knew what the answer would be. You haven't been much of a father anyway, so why be interested now? I am losing Camille, I am losing Shirley, and I have no idea how to win them back. Creon gets to stay king, but he loses anyway.

Beverly Gancia has moved abroad. Gone to Chicago to live with a cousin and begin a new life. She took Melay, her younger daughter, with her, and she couldn't wait to leave. Regine refused to come along. Having nowhere to stay after Beverly sold the house, she has decided, upon my invitation and with Shirley's blessing, to board with me. She stays in the first floor guest room with its own toilet and bath. It seems we've formed a kind of bond, thanks to that fragile moment of grief that I was witness to. The handful of times she sups with me she seems more open, forthcoming about her life. She tells her Tito Carlo about her parents, and about how she longed to be free of them. She is so much happier to be in college now, in nearby UP, and free of her mother. She doesn't quite say it, but it seems Nonoy wasn't a much better father to her than I was to Camille. I don't blame him.

If she isn't locked in her room playing loud music she's at school. Weekends she is out with friends. Once in a while she has some of them over, including that Eric fellow, who sings and strums an acoustic, and he sounds better than he did in the play. He made his voice growly and low as Creon, a mistake for someone with a thin voice but a clear, pleasant upper register. Not the kind you cast in a rock musical.

They've put a band together, with Regine on lead guitar and backup vocals. She asked me if they could rehearse in the garage. I said they are welcome to the living room. And so a few times now the house has filled with the occasionally melodic

scrunching of a rock band finding its feet. They ask me what I think of their music, and I tell them it's okay, even Nirvana took a while to become Nirvana. No one smiled at that.

Now Eric comes over almost every day. This afternoon Regine sat in the garden with him before it got dark, and they moved to her room. That was hours ago, and later that night I go to her door. Music plays, and I can't hear anything else. On her social media accounts there are plenty of photos of the two of them, she leaning into him, he kissing her forehead, her shoulder. They smile, they laugh, as if what they have is precious and will last forever.

A little while later they come out. I ask where they're going. Out for a drink, Regine says, whose blouse falls two inches short of her skirt, a tight denim number that ends too soon above her knee. Don't be home too late, is all I can think to say to her. Take care of her, I call out to Eric, as they disappear into the night. For a long moment I think of following after them. I will tear you apart with my own hands if you don't.

In the upstairs bathroom I spend a few minutes thinking about the short denim skirt she was just wearing and what I might do with it if I were a certain kind of man. Then I wash the sink slowly with plenty of hand soap. I am not that kind of man, no, I am not.

I look at the figure in the mirror and think about things I regret, things I don't. I may have failed as a father with my own daughter, but this girl is a second chance. I will protect her, I will protect her as my own. I will not fail this time. I will protect this vulnerable, beautiful thing from the men who would do her wrong, from the monsters that lurk in the darkness and the ones who hide in plain sight. Yes, I will do this. Even if it kills me.