



That Distant Shore

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IT HAPPENED DURING that last summer when we did nothing but stare at hot bright skies while lounging like beached whales on the warm coarse sand of Bolong. Thirty-three kilometers away from Zamboanga's busy pueblo and we managed to make some sort of a haven out of a tiny hut. A hut that we rented from a fisherman for one and a half month. At night, the melody from the waves oscillated between frantic splashing and gentle lapping. In the morning, it was not uncommon to wake up to the sight of a hundred holes in our sandy floor courtesy of the burrowing mole crabs.

It was the last of the whole summers that we spent together, and we chose a small fishing village where everyone knew everyone else. It was the end of an era, I suppose, and perhaps it started with that pale man wearing a wide-brimmed hat. We saw him first, emerging out of a dusty van then making his casual way to the beach. It was late afternoon, and the place was almost empty, save for a mother who sat under the shade of a lone tree with two children who were helping her pry sea urchins open.

The pale man walked past them, and he spotted us—a tourist sensing his own kind. He continued to walk along the shoreline, the setting sun like the blazing of a million golden flowers before him. He stopped when he was but a few meters away





from us and just stood there, as if in awe of the fiery display of colors that would soon disappear from our sight in a matter of seconds.

When the sun had completely made its descent, I started packing our things, still aware of the newcomer who just stood there as the foamy edge of the water lapped at his aquashoes. Gia, being the friendlier of the two of us, waved hello. The pale man took it as an invitation to approach us, and he didn't slow down in doing so. "I'm going to make this the most beautiful place in Zamboanga, you know!" He was smiling from ear to ear.

"But it already is! At least for us," Gia replied.

"No, no . . . you don't understand. Beautiful, happier, livelier. Like Boracay, you know? You've been to Boracay?"

We both nodded.

"Ah, I knew it! You two girls look like you've been to places. So, imagine, Boracay. But grander, more things to do for amusement. And not just for partying, ah, how do I say it? Millennials? Yes, not just for partying millennials, but like Disneyland . . . a happy place for all ages! Imagine that. Here, in humble Zamboanga."

His excitement was contagious, and for a moment, I found myself and Gia smiling, until the absurdity of it all hit us. "Well, good luck with that," was all that I said and we went on our way to Nanay Sitang's house.

The nearby eateries in Bolong closed before sundown, so we arranged with our landlady to cook dinner for us as well. For a small sum, she agreed to serve two additional plates on her dining table, and it was through these shared suppers that our vocabulary of Filipino fish, expanded from just galunggong, bangus, and tilapia to sapsap, tulingan, maya-maya and bisugo. 'Nay Sitang's seven children had also taken it as a task for themselves to teach me and Gia proper Chavacano. Not the broken one spoken downtown, Ling-Ling, the eldest, declared.

We told them about our encounter with the pale man wearing a wide-brimmed hat. We didn't think much of it, and even laughed off his preposterous ideas, but 'Nay Sitang and her husband did not seem to share our mirth.

"There's no stopping that man," was all Tiyoy Lando, 'Nay Sitang's husband, had to say and he spent the rest of the night in such a foul mood.

"I'm sure he won't come back tomorrow," Gia said.

The following day, he was there again, wearing the same wide-brimmed hat and aquashoes, and beaming like he had just won the lottery. But he did not come alone this time. He had around a dozen other men with him, all dressed in a variety of rash guards and swim shirts with shorts. Some had clipboards with them and seemed





intent on surveying the area, and one was even looking through an equipment set on a tripod.

He waved at us. Gia waved back.

We spread out our *malong* farther down the beach, away from the men, and I started unpacking the contents of our lunch basket. The same ritual we had been doing every day in Bolong.

"I'm going for a swim now. In case anything happens, there's a knife in there," Gia said and pointed her lips toward her denim shorts.

"You have I knife with you?" I asked.

"It's for the green mangoes. But also, for assholes," she whispered as she kissed me lightly on the lips. "I won't be long."

And then she was but a quickly disappearing flash of bright pink against a blanket of blue. I took off my shorts as well and basked in the sun in my bikini. The first time we did that—lazed around in our swimwear—Nay Sitang and people who walked by gave us scandalized looks. But in a week or so, they had gotten used to the sight of us, and left us pretty much alone. I loved being by the sea, but I couldn't stand swimming for more than a few minutes. Gia's the opposite, though, and could even spend hours on end just floating and playing in the water. I watched her disappear and reappear. She would wave at me every now and then, and I would wave back.

This whole thing was Gia's idea. She planned out every summer this way, just like how we first met in Siquijor three years ago. It was Palaui the year after, Camiguin next, and then Zamboanga. Always a remote island, a quiet seaside town that was still off the tourists' radar, a sandy beach that had the best sunset view. She wore the same bright pink swimsuit, and she never failed to mention how it still fit her perfectly after all those years. And I must admit, I loved watching Gia in that swimsuit, especially how it clung to her after a swim. She smiled in my direction as she headed back to shore, radiant like a bronzed goddess.

The crowd of beach-goers had gradually increased. Some went out for a swim, but most, like us, were just watching the man with wide-brimmed hat walking around with his troop of men in hardhats. Some more workers arrived in larger vehicles, parked right next to the van. It was the first time since we got there when the beach actually filled up with human activity, an expanse of busy bobbing heads punctuating the blueness of the sea. We just sat there, on our drenched *malong*, frowning from both the glare of the sun and this sudden intrusion.

That night, we returned to the same spot. It was Gia's idea, and though I wasn't really up for it, I could not turn her down. Not when she said it with that little mischievous grin of hers that always sent warm ripples down my spine. Walking



around at that time, we realized how little we knew about the place. The salty sea breeze wrapped itself around us and everywhere was just an outline of varying shades of darkness, from the sweep of the sandy coast to the black protuberance of the distant cliffs. Beyond and beneath this immense space was life still unknown and, possibly, unimaginable to mankind. It was an overwhelming and intoxicating experience, that sense of smallness. I felt Gia reach out to hold my hand and I knew that she, too, understood. We stayed there for a moment, sharing that silence, just watching: the waves crashing and licking over the curving surfaces, while the stars sparkled like jewels scattered on an inky velvet cloth.

We woke up late the next day, when yellow-orange slants of light had already filtered through our tiny room. Gia stretched beside me, her loud yawn breaking the stillness in our bed. "Shoot, it's past 10! Our spot's probably already taken."

"Mmm-hmm, and it's a Saturday too. Lots of people heading out to Once Islas." I inched closer, inhaling her tousled hair as I pressed her bare back against my chest once more. "Can we just skip beach today and spend the whole day here instead?"

Gia sat up. "No, I want to see what they're doing now."

"They?"

"You know, that man with that funny hat. And his endless supply of workers emerging out of those vans. I wanna see what they're up to now."

"Okay . . . how about if I stay here and just tell me what you've seen soon as you get back?"

"But we're supposed to spend the entire time here together. Remember? After this . . . after this, it'll be different again."

Gia stared at me with a pained expression on her face.

"Alright. But let's go grab some breakfast at that Jollibee near the gas station first."

"Oooh . . . feeling fancy, are we? You still have cash left?"

"Just enough for the rest of our stay here. But honestly, my city girl stomach's been longing for some unhealthy food today. I think it's grown tired of grilled fresh catch already"

Gia stood up and threw a shirt at me. "It really is almost over, isn't it?"

Outside, the beach was packed with locals and tourists, most of whom did not know that the jump-off site to the famed Once Islas had been closed due to "renovations." So the crowd of weekend beach ragers had to do with selecting their little plot of sand and building their own personal spaces there using an assortment of defensive barriers like clothes, towels, coolers, and linked slippers. Far off, all we



could see were steel barricades blocking everyone off and container trucks carrying gargantuan barrels. Residents from the nearby *barangays* had also arrived, each with their own theory as to what was going on behind what appeared like an ongoing construction. Despite the incessant murmuring, our voices all drowned in the monstrous gurgling from the other side, like a set of giant constipated water pipes gasping for air.

Gia's grip was almost vicious, dragging me behind her as we pushed past the sea of people. All around was the hum of busy engines and the sloshing sound of water as it made its way from the sea, through the crumpled snake-like tubes, down to the colossal barrels. Flailing fish, sea stars, and shells of varying colors lay vulnerable on the newly exposed area of sand, like plastic toys left scattered around.

One of the workers, a man wearing a bright orange helmet, ran toward us and stopped us as we neared the barricades. "Sorry, ladies. This is a restricted area."

"And what is it exactly you're doing here?" Gia snapped.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "What does it look like to you?"

"Well, you showed up here, started sucking the sea dry and leaving a mess of dead sea creatures in your wake!"

"I know you lot will be coming, but I never thought it'd be this soon. Please, go now, ma'am."

The man gently pushed Gia away, but she held her ground.

"Who are you anyway? Do you even have a permit to do this?"

He chuckled. Gia pressed on.

"Does the city mayor know about this?"

"City mayor, ha! Good one!"

He doubled up with laughter. "Look, I'd love to stop and chat with you ladies some more, but I gotta go. If you have a problem with our work here, take it up with him." He looked back and pointed at the pale man with wide-brimmed hat, who was then shouting orders at children with worn-out slippers pushing wagons full of heavy stones. The man in orange helmet whistled and a few other workers started walking up to us, but we had left even before they got anywhere near us.

Gia was shaking. I followed her angry strides up to the cliff that gave an almost bird's-eye view of the long stretch of the beach. We were not alone when we got there. Tiyoy Lando and Ling-Ling were there, too, the latter sitting precariously on the edge.

"I told you, Tay. That was Ate Gia! Her bright pink swimsuit is really hard to miss," Ling-Ling said.

"What are you two doing up here?" I asked.





Tiyoy Lando smiled, “You know, I’ve known this sea since I was born. Just like my father and grandfather, too, before that. As soon as I was able to swim, maybe five or six, I joined the older men when they would cast a wide net, around 800 square meters, and just waited until the net was full. Most of the catch, we sold at the flea market. The rest, we divided equally. There was always enough for everyone.”

He paused and pointed toward the construction site with a stick. We squinted, looking in the distance, where what seemed like a rusty blade jutted out of the water. “You see that? I believe that’s from a shipwreck that goes back to World War 2, or so they say.”

“But that’s crazy!” Gia exclaimed. “The battle never reached the shores here. It was largely contained in Manila, reaching only as far as Bataan.”

Tiyoy Lando shrugged, “That’s what I heard from them this morning.” He paused. “Still, this place is special, rich in history that will perhaps remain unwritten.”

We could only nod.

“But they sold it anyway,” Tiyoy Lando sighed.

There were more barricades set in place in the week that followed, on them the words in bold block letters: LUCKY 8 BEACH WATERPARK. The eighteen-wheeler trucks parked in their usual sections, hoses protruding out of them continued to drain the sea in loud, greedy gulps. The main road that led to Bolong had been paved smooth to cater to its anticipated tourist visitors. Years of complaints from the locals had fallen on the deaf ears of the local government officials, but a massive water park construction had no problem expediting the process. People talked in hushed tones about the amount given to the city office to privatize the sea, how it was part of the agreement in order to not completely cut off electricity from the city that had already been suffering from rotational supply. Someone said something about a decade-long contract. Someone said something about forever.

Bolong had always been a fishing village for as long as ‘Nay Sitang and Tiyoy Lando could remember. It was too far from downtown pueblo for anything interesting to happen, just a speckle of village that lived in harmony with the sea. The locals, in silence, knew that they had to give up generations’ knowledge of fishery for more practical skills that would get them hired in the soon-to-open resort. We watched as they traded their fish nets and little motor boats to take up short courses on housekeeping and hospitality. We watched as their tongues acquired new masters, learning how to say “thank you” and “come again” in both Mandarin and Hokkien.

One night, the construction site was left unmanned as it was a holiday. Residents walked the stretch of the beach under a moonless sky, reminiscing about



more peaceful days when they could do this at any time. Gia walked toward what seemed like an opening and pushed lightly against a thick sheet of metal that served as an entry point for the workers. It tilted ever so slightly, until gravity took a better hold of it, hitting the muddy ground with a loud slap. Heads turned our way, and we decided then and there that in our retelling of this night, we would say how we broke through the barricades with our homemade explosives, knife in hand. We squeezed through the tiny opening, the scent of rotting fish and industrial haze overwhelming our lungs. Everyone else followed suit, walking guardedly on what was once a familiar shore, now a landscape that stank heavily of salt, decay and cement.

In the middle of it stood the wooden stilts that held a tarpaulin showcasing what was to rise in that area: an enormous three-level water slide built at the sides of the cliff and took riders directly to the open sea; jet-red speed boats trailing parasailers; inflatable balloons in a rainbow array of unicorns, swans and watermelons; a two-story *kubo* with a minibar floated right in the middle of the breathtaking turquoise sea, where tanned models sipped cocktails while lounging on its bamboo floor. Just below the picture, a printed text read: "Bienvenidos na Bolong! The future of beach parties."

We looked at each other until everyone around us started talking, in subdued tones first, then in raised voices, until the whole place was abuzz with confusion, excitement and gossip. I reached down and took Gia's hand in mine. I knew it was the wrong moment to tell her, but I was caught dumbstruck, and the words I'd been keeping from her just came gushing out.

"I've been thinking of getting a job. A regular office job . . ." I trailed off

She let go and smiled sadly my way. "Yeah? I knew this was bound to happen. I just never thought it'd be this soon."

I stood there, silent. My palm's sweat mingling with hers. We did try to make it work, to make it last as long as we could sustain it, leaving behind partners, careers, and carefully-scheduled days.

Gia continued, a bit too cheerfully, "But summer's not yet over. We still have time. Let's just make the best out of it."

"It was a good run."

"It was."

Gia took both of my hands and pressed them to her lips. We walked back to the broken entry way, past the stench and the noise, past the drunk men who were arguing about the rumored treasures hidden deep in the navel of the sea, past Ling-Ling who was, as usual, entertaining a bunch of children with her wild tales. We entered our tiny hut in the dark, and for a moment there, it felt like the humid summer evening cradled us in her arms.



I woke up in the middle of that night, and Gia was nowhere to be found. Her side of the bed was cold, her pink swimsuit that she had left hanging by the window gone. I felt a tightening in my chest that I had never felt before, until I saw a crumpled piece of paper under the plump mango that we had picked from a tree yesterday: *Didn't want to wake you up. Don't worry. Just went out for a swim.*

I put on some clothes, pocketed the note and the mango, and went out. Even without the trail of footprints that I knew was hers, I was certain where to find her. She was there, in our usual spot, with our malong, drenched and looking longingly at the sea. Gray mud splattered the length of her legs, and she just sat there toying with her fruit knife. She wasn't surprised at all when she saw me.

"You went back inside the construction site, didn't you?" I asked.

"It was still open," she smirked.

"Gia, that was dangerous! Look how dirty your legs are."

She rolled her eyes and waved for me to sit down beside her.

"Remember that blade-like thing we saw from the cliff?"

"The one Tiyoy Lando said was from a sunken World War 2 ship?"

"Yes, that one." She laughed weakly, "Well, it's fake."

"What do you mean?"

"It's fake. I inspected it and it was made of plastic and even had the company logo stamped on it. And it wasn't the only one. There were fake little artillery remains, fake remnants of sunken vessels, fake golden coins, and even fake coral reefs—all deliberately placed there, like plastic castles for a pet fish in someone's aquarium." She paused, "It's for the divers, I suppose. To make their contained diving operations more interesting."

In the months to come, more workers would return on site, more machines would be brought out once they had sucked enough water. LUCKY 8 would be celebrated by the city mayor for providing job opportunities for the locals and for opening up the ports of Zamboanga to world-class tourism, turning a blind eye on the tampering that the company had done. LUCKY 8 would get clearance to import the pink sand from Sta. Cruz Island so that the water park would be more Instagrammable. Of course, LUCKY 8 would treat the sand first so that it would be gentle to the tourists' sensitive skin. The sand that they had extracted from Bolong would be treated as well, to be bottled and marketed as the new miracle clay infused with sea salt and vital nutrients. When they would pump water back, it would be the filtered, chlorinated kind. Pictures of the humongous slide and floating bar would flood social media, former fishermen would learn how to mix fancy drinks or perform acrobatics,





and the admission fee would be half a local's monthly salary.

But in that moment, that night, with Gia sitting on our malong, her legs covered in gray mud, the beach was still ours and we still had time. No matter how little. In the distance, I thought I heard the faint song of a whale. I wondered how it must have felt traveling through the currents, lost in the rapidly changing ocean and vanishing coral reefs. How it was exhausted from singing with no other whales to hear it and respond, and how it badly just wanted to swim to any shore, and just lie there. There was no whale, of course. Just the empty seabed, vast and haunting in its ruins.

I sat beside Gia and took the fruit knife from her cold hands. I peeled the mango open, cut up a thin slice, and fed it to her. She took me in her arms and I rested my head on her shoulder, inhaling the salty-sweet scent of the sea from her mass of tangled hair. We bathed in moonlight and basked in the fading glow of summer. And that was all the moment that we had left, but it was still all ours and it was all real.