

Crisscross

[Excerpt from the novel *One Week*]

VJ Campilan

I HAVE A week left.

Feels weird to say it in this instance. Back in college, I'd be hanging about on my dorm bed and I'd say I only have two hours left before the next class, but it didn't have this kind of finality. My counsellor Clara has been asking me if I'm having cold feet. She says it's okay to change my mind and give myself another year or even six months. *Some people do it*, she said, *and they have a better outlook in life*. They gain a whole new perspective after having thought about their nonexistence. But I always thought that what's so scary about dying is not the act, but losing consciousness. Like I said, the finality. Never opening one's eyes again to see your family and friends and the sky above and the sea beyond. Never thinking, *oh what am I going to eat for breakfast?*

But I don't think I'll change my mind. I can be very firm when I want to. If I make up my mind, it takes a hurricane and other acts of God to change it. It's the same with people. I have two boxes in my head for them. *Like* and *Dislike*. When I put a person in the *Dislike* Box, it takes the ascension of Atlantis from the bowels of the sea for me to move them to the *Like* Box. They very rarely leave their designated boxes, although some do, and sometimes I have regrets about that, too. All in all, I prefer order and permanence. Mom would always tell me, *only a fool doesn't change his mind*. Tell that to someone who hesitated on the pedestrian lane and got ran over. Sometimes, you just got to grab the bull by the horns and throw him over the cliff before he even figures out what is happening.

But yeah, I don't like it when people try to change my mind; it makes me feel as if somebody rummaged through the shelves in my head and scattered all the stuff, and now there's junk on the floor rolling about, not knowing what to do with themselves. It only makes me wish I could pick them up and put them back.

Clara is very sneaky, though. She meets up with me for our weekly lunch and

starts the conversation all harmless and stuff, about shoes and movies and makeup. And then she slowly directs the discussion to the Program, even though she knows I don't like talking about it. *I made up my mind*, I'd tell her, and she'd be like, *yes I know but maybe you just need to go over what's in your head*. I've been going over what's in my head for a long time now. Thirty years, in fact. I think I'm pretty sure what's in there all the time. And anyway, I thought Clara's supposed to be on my side. She's part of the service, after all. To discuss the procedure with me, to guide me on the things I should do. For closure. But so far, she has been trying her best to convince me to postpone.

Some people benefit greatly from the Program, but some don't, she told me once. I take it she thinks she might save me yet.

Oh Clara, the eternal optimist. I guess that's what makes her a good counsellor, trying to always see the bright side of things and what not. But I keep telling her that sometimes there are no bright sides. Or there are no acceptable side that can be considered bright enough, in my view. Sometimes, there are only dark and less dark sides. But none of them are good options, right?

Clara frowns at this. Sometimes, she doesn't understand my thought process. I get that it might be difficult for her, because it's difficult for me to understand myself, too. But I try anyway, and I think I have a good idea about myself after all these years.

My name is Olivia. I just turned the big 3-0 last month. I was expecting the world to end the way some people had moaned on and on about reaching that particular milestone. But it was just another day full of drudgery, but with cake, so it wasn't all that bad. I am moderately successful in my career. I bought my own condo unit, and I have a three-year-old Russian Blue cat called Commodore Tarantula (whom I will be turning over to a good friend), and I enrolled in the Voluntary Termination Program three months ago. That's really my summary profile, I guess, not unlike the one they have over at the Center.

It's so hard to summarize a life, and yet that's what's required of us most of the time. Just tell the good parts. No one wants to know the bad parts, that's what I've been telling Clara, but she said, *au contraire I like hearing the bad parts. The bad parts are what makes humans interesting, because the good parts are just about as exciting as traffic on a rainy day*. So I told her that maybe she's just an inner sadist who gets a kick out of people's misery and deplorable life choices. Maybe that's why she got into counselling. I expected her to be offended, considering that we had only known each other for a week at that time, but she actually laughed out loud, the silly girl. She said she gets accused with that all the time, so maybe I should get in line. That's how I knew that we were going to get along, Clara and me. It takes a special kind of person to not be horrified at the things I say.

Anyway, I'm packing my things right now, because I'll be going on a road trip to visit my mother in Ilocos. It's a long drive, and Clara is secretly pleased that my mother is so far away. She said the fresh air and the green landscape will do wonders to my soul, as if the plague of existence is so easily cured by a change of scenery. She said, *who said anything about a cure? I just said it will do your soul good.* Clara, the enigma. If I didn't like her so much, I'd be asking for another counsellor.

My mother doesn't know about my enrollment in the Program, although if I tell her she probably wouldn't be surprised. She always harped about how she got cut nearly into half like a butchered pig just to get me out. *You were one hardheaded baby,* she told me, *you had your own timeline, and we should be ashamed for disturbing your peace.* I always felt that she was alluding to my entire life at some point.

I can't help but love my mother, although the more I entered adulthood, the more that love developed a sour aftertaste. My mother was a livewire; she was always a fireball of energy running around the house, yelling at us to pick up our clothes, get ourselves to school, cook rice. She rarely put up her feet, and it's no wonder, since she was a single mother with two children who popped out of her one after the other. If she wasn't cooking something, she would be going out of the house for work, although she never told us what she did exactly. *It doesn't matter, because you and your brother go to school just fine and have food and shoes and what else would you need,* she said, although at one point it sounded very much like an accusation.

Lately, she has mellowed some in her old age as struggling with a decaying body tends to do that to a person. I insisted on enrolling her in an assisted care facility, but she only stared at me as if I had just wasted a glass of good wine by throwing it on her face. *We need to be practical, Mom,* I said. *I'm your only child; well, your only useful child.* My big brother has been serving his second stint in jail, after the police got wind that he had been selling cocaine in a high-end club. I've always wondered if I was a bad person, because during his first time in jail, I was slightly relieved. I thought that now maybe Mom wouldn't be too eager to bring up how my birth nearly split her into half.

Your brother is just a screaming boy inside, Mom said after we visited him one Sunday afternoon. *He just hasn't learned how to stop.* One thing I really admired about Mom right then is that she had never blamed herself for how my brother turned out. *I tried my best under the circumstances, being a young widow,* she said. *Although honestly, your father is better off in heaven, because he always thought he was simply too good for this earth.* Until now, I'm not sure what was the real situation between them. All I know is that they married super young, although Mom would point out that she wasn't knocked up at that time, as my grandmother used to accuse her of being. *Mama wanted drama,* Mom said, her thick lips twisted in mild disgust. *She watched*

too many telenovelas, so she wanted to reenact them somewhat. Did you know she tried to throw a mirror at my head when I said I'd gone and eloped? It wasn't necessary!

That anecdote made me sad that I had missed knowing most of my relatives. It seemed that they had all died even before I was born, on both sides. My own father died when I was five, from a heart attack. He was an accountant, and they found his body slumped on his office desk, buried underneath all the receipts he was trying to reconcile. Two days after the funeral, as I was contemplating on how best to kick over an anthill in the backyard, I overheard our neighbor gossiping with her fellow Zumba enthusiast about how my father probably died from the stress of trying to make ends meet, what with two young children and a wife who's always buying something or other from the *alahera*. Our backyard wall was quite tall, so maybe that's why they didn't see the child crouched right underneath quietly flattening all the ants that came out of the hill with her pugy hands.

Neighbor 1 lowered her voice then and said, *I know it's bad to speak ill of the dead, but it's not the dead who's ill this time.* Neighbor 2 also lowered her voice in acknowledgement of their shared concern over our welfare and said, *Beatrice is not quite right in the head, wouldn't you say? Why would you buy jewels instead of formula milk for your children?* And they clicked their tongues and I could imagine them shaking their heads, too, thinking of the poor, poor children. Then: *mark my words, those children will grow up wrong, too.*

I often wondered if those neighbors feel gratified that their prediction has come true. If they ever thought of Beatrice and Elizalde's children walking around all "wrong," all the wires disconnected or crisscrossed in their minds. By the way, I love that word. Crisscross, I mean. Did you know it originated from the Middle English term *Christ's cross*? No wonder it always feels like an uphill climb to Calvary in my head.

Anyway, maybe the neighbors always wondered why we can't seem to fit ourselves into an acceptable arrangement, bony elbows always sticking out like an eyesore, clothes mismatched, unflattering haircuts. Once, Mom cut my bangs way too short, and they ended up looking like a gnarled *walis tingting* stump. I didn't realize they were bloodcurdling until I got to school and, of course, the children wantonly laughed at my face. And then another time, we were required to bring a plant for science class, and my mother just took a bunch of elongated leaves and stuck them in the soil, and my teacher called me privately to her desk after class and made an elaborate show of pulling out the leaves one by one like a slow motion of "He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not" and said, *Are you a cheater, Olivia? Is that how you plan to grow up?* And then I remembered again our neighbors' prediction, and I hated my Mom then for not knowing better, but mostly I hated myself for not knowing either.

I haven't really told Clara any of these episodes. I think I may have brought them up briefly, but always deciding at the last minute to keep out some vital detail. I don't need Clara to tell me why I'm messed up. Maybe, at the end of the day, I wanted to shield her from that side of me, although she probably knows that something is somewhat wrong. Why else would I enroll in the Program? But I always comforted myself with the idea that everyone is wrong in their own ways, although it's just the very brave and the very despairing who would dare admit it.

I've finally finished packing, but I couldn't bear to close the luggage, because then it would be really time to go. And I'm not ready. I peeked out through the blinds and looked at my SUV parked just outside the house, full tank, newly washed. Good old, Esmeralda. People scoff at people who name their cars but, listen, if you place your life in the hands of something, you have to give it a name as some kind of communion. It'd be terrible to die inside a car, but inside Esmeralda it seemed better, like laying your head on the lap of a good friend watching the stars wheel across the sky, and then even the darkness becomes warm.

I make last-minute checks on my phone to see if I had any messages from Mom. I've texted her that I'll be coming to visit, although she hasn't replied. I rarely call nowadays. Phone calls to me are confrontations. It's like barging up right to someone's face to yell at them. It's saying, *you need to listen to me now, because I can't care about your comfort*. I hate being phone-called, so I rarely do it to anyone else. Also, the last significant phone call I had was ... disastrous, to say at the very least. We were both unprepared. I was the one who initiated it, but that didn't make me prepared.

I remember that I was sitting on my window seat, the one that is overlooking a dead river, although the condo management promised that they would get the part of the river that is directly across the property cleaned, before they allowed tenants to move in. In hindsight, I should have known that piecemeal river cleaning was too bold a promise, and, therefore, could not be trusted. Anyway, I was sitting on the window seat, and the sun was at the point in the sky where it hit me directly in the face, although not in an uncomfortable way. I was too nervous anticipating the upcoming conversation to pull down the blinds, so I conducted the call with my eyes squinting into watery slits, watching as the sun slowly sank into a dead river. The symbolism was lost to me back then, but now I can appreciate it.

I lost Chester that day, of course. Little did I know that barely a year later, we would run into each other in a restaurant, and he would stare at me from his seat, and he would not realize that he was crying.

I DID A DETOUR to the city jail. I parked at the farthest slot, because the building's brain-gray paint, peeling all over the place and smeared with dried water tracks from all the storms that had besieged this city, is not a sight that would lift one's spirits. I wasn't planning to come over, but here I am with Esmeralda sitting in the parking lot, contemplating our life choices.

I check my face on the overhead mirror—not too shabby. The orange-brown dye had crept down nearly to the very tips of my black, shoulder-length hair, making it look like I'm trying to be too avant-garde for my age. Whatever. I'm not here for a beauty pageant. Although I can argue that I inherited Mom's light-brown eyes, which in turn she inherited from my grandfather, who was about one-quarter Spanish. Most people don't expect these eyes upon my person though. They're always saying, *I love your contacts!* I grew tired of correcting them only to see them recoil slightly. *Ows?* So, nowadays, I just tell them I got my contacts from an optical shop in Binondo. I make up the name of the shop all the time and hope that they actually go and try to find the place.

So. These brown eyes. My big brother has them, too, although his are a tad darker. We take these eyes for granted and never really understood the neighbors' fascination with them whenever they met us going home from school in our ill-fitting uniforms with a button or two missing, and stains still discernible under direct sunlight. They'd always say our eyes are fit for celebrities, as if celebrities are a higher subset of the human genus.

At any rate, these eyes had helped my brother in his career as drug pusher for the elite. He dyed his hair ash-blond, and together with his fair skin, which I did not share with him, he could very well pass off as a spoiled college frat boy out for some kicks. It started out small time. He'd sell just four of five bags and earn enough cash to tide him over for a couple of months. He moved out of the house when he was 17, shortly after he got kicked out from his second university. He said his brain was as hard as a rock and not at all like a sponge, so it was useless trying to educate him.

For all of Mom's complaints of the theatrics that run in the family, she was keen on them, too. The first time my brother was expelled, she wailed like a dying seagull and lamented why she bothered working so hard when her children would just break her heart. I resented her for it, because I was actually doing very well at school. Somehow, I always got a special promo package with my brother—his failures are also mine.

Every time my brother brought home a letter from a teacher (which he didn't even bother to hide, the scoundrel), Mom would berate me for not helping him out

with his schoolwork, as if I were the one who decided to bring him into the world. At one point, I got so sick of it that I told her that maybe she should have realized early on that bearing children is only an option. She slapped me so hard I thought my eyes would fall out and roll under the bed. She told me I prove that point very well, and although we got back to begrudging civility afterward, there was a piece of my heart that she had clawed out. I suppose it serves me right, because I have a mouth in me that's worse than a drunk policeman's. I have a habit of dressing up my razor words in fancy clothes, and Mom said she hated how civilized I sounded even if I was being a basic bastard.

Oddly enough, I don't hate my brother despite all the troubles he gave me just by way of association. For starters, he had the misfortune of being named Junior, destined to be my father's version 2.0 or the less-talented twin. Because they do look remarkably alike. Even my brother's baby pictures are an exact replica of my father's. Still, for all my father's inclination for logic and what-not, he couldn't realize that naming his son Junior was basically forfeiting the child's future. Or that it was the greatest vanity that one could impose upon this earth: I made this child, but no that's not enough, I gotta give him a name that refers to me. Anyway, I try not to think about this too much, because it just hurts my head.

My brother wasn't fazed, though. He carried on with as much dignity as could be had when one is named Junior. He told me that names can be changed all the time. It isn't something that is written in stone. True enough, when he started his career in crime, he rose from the ashes and rechristened himself Michaelo. I wanted to tell him that that was kind of pushing it, but I couldn't deny him his chance at reincarnation.

We didn't hear from my brother for two years after he ran away, and Mom basically accepted the fact the he might be dead, what with his current trajectory and disregard for common sense. My brother proved her wrong, though. One day, she got a call from the NBI saying that they had my brother under custody. Even though Mom would curse the day my brother was born like she didn't have anything to do with it, she did not hesitate to bail him out and try to get him a good lawyer. *I can't let your father down*, she said, and I always thought why is that, since he was long gone and wouldn't be able to care anymore anyhow? Then I thought maybe it was the remarkable resemblance, as if father had ensured that Mom would always have a physical reminder of himself, so he could haunt her for the rest of her life.

We couldn't prevent my brother getting jail time, so in he went for three years, until he got parole. I gotta hand it to my brother because he was always such an excellent actor. He fooled every one into thinking he was a changed man, including

me. I should have known better, having grown up with him and seeing his prowess firsthand even at a young age.

When I was 9 and he was 10, Mom didn't come home for two days, and we had no idea where she had gone, because when we came home from school, she was no longer there. Eventually, we ran out of food, so my brother gave a performance that was so encompassing in its utter commitment. He went to the nearest *sari-sari* store with his shabbiest clothes and pretended that he was going to buy something or other, and then he "fainted" in front of Aling Teresita, who peered out of the store's small porthole and screamed loud enough to bring all the neighbors and the *tambays* and the dead. Acknowledging the gathering audience, my brother upped his performance and pretended to have stomach pains, folding his body into a fetal position and whimpering like a small animal caught in a trap. I could only stand nearby with a horrified look, my hand clutched around my throat.

Eventually, someone knelt down and shook him, and he slowly opened his eyes, and blearily looked around. "I'm sorry," he croaked, "We can't find our mother, and we're so hungry. I gave all the remaining food to my little sister." At this, everyone turned to look at me, with varying expressions of judgment on their faces. I could have killed my brother right there and then.

"*Dios mio*. How can a mother abandon her children like this?" Aling Teresita said, hurrying back to her store to throw assorted canned goods in a plastic bag. She threw in a loaf of bread for good measure. She gave it to me and said, "Here, take care of your brother, now." But she had that look on her face, a combination of pity and disgust, not just directed at Mom somewhere, but at *me*. As if I were an abomination, and she couldn't wait to get me out of her store and back into my own house. My hand shook even as I accepted the plastic bag, suddenly conscious of everyone's eyes on us. I helped my brother to his feet, and he made a show of putting his arm around me, head still lolling about, until we got inside our house where I told him to get his weight off me as there wasn't an audience anymore.

He threw himself onto our battered sofa and laughed and laughed until he was giddy. He must have realized right then the kind of future he could have. In his mind's eye, the world must have opened up to all sorts of possibilities. The taste of sweet victory, of things going his way, perhaps for the very first time in his life.

"We'll never starve again," he said, putting an arm around my shoulders, his grip strong and firm. Stupidly, I believed him then.

To be honest, Aling Teresita was not a mean-spirited woman to begin with, even with how she looked at us sometimes. When we were younger and Mom would ask us to buy salt or something, Aling Teresita would sometimes give us a candy each

and tell us that it wasn't our fault, whatever that meant. She would have given us something to eat if we went up to her and told her the truth. But my brother looked like he finally found his purpose, and he probably was just itching to tell Mom when she came home how resourceful he was.

That night, Mom finally came back, a bit soaked from the sudden rain. We just ate our dinner of rice and Maling, and were staring at the old television in the semi-darkness. We stared at her and she was staring back as if she didn't recognize us, as if she got into the wrong house and was suddenly alarmed to see children in her living room. But after some time, she went upstairs, her bare feet hardly making any sound. Not her usual entrance for sure, deprived of all theatrics. It unnerved me more than her short disappearance. It felt like she returned to us a different person, and although she was back to her exasperated self the following morning, yelling at my brother for waking up so late for school, and yelling at me for not waking him up, there was still something changed about her.

I couldn't grasp what it was exactly back then, and it probably was just sheer intuition, but I felt that for the first time in her life, she looked like she had accepted what her life had become, the children she had borne, the fate she had been handed. But her eyes still had that sheen of unhappiness, and when I was much younger, I always wished, despite our frequent arguments, that I could do anything to make the unhappiness go away, even if it meant that I should stop existing, if that was what it would take.

Someone raps on my window and I startle, ready to step on the pedal and drive away. But it's just the security guard looking at me with furrowed brows, perhaps wondering if I'm a co-conspirator waiting to drive off with some escaped convict. I can't blame him; it's hard not to be suspicious in a place like this. I roll down the window and give what I hope is a winning smile.

"I'm visiting my brother. Just getting myself ready, so I don't cry in front of him."

The guard's face softens. I knew that line would always work. He nods and walks off. I leave everything in the car to spare me the trouble of depositing stuff with the guards. The male guards looked me up and down with barely disguised smirks as the female guard patted me down by the visitor area, more thoroughly than I was comfortable with (or even necessary, considering I didn't have anything on me). But I didn't really care about the discomfort, because the human body is just as common as a piece of rock you would find on the roadside. We all bleed, we all break, we're barely fit for survival. Even lovers' bodies can only be titillating for x number of years, before they become just another breast and another thigh that just happens to be comfortable, like a favorite childhood blanket.

Besides, how many times have I been touched in ways that I didn't like just by riding on Manila's public transportation? It's difficult to be furious when you're all basically just laundry piled and pressed tight on top of each other in the buses and trains. Soon enough, it doesn't even matter which hands are which, you all just become one person with a million limbs not unlike the Hindu gods. You have transcended humanity; otherwise, how is one to survive that kind of situation day in and day out?

Anyway, I sit on a bench by the corner and wait for my brother. Goodness knows what he has been up to nowadays. This is the fifth year of his second stint in jail, and he has been warned that parole is now unlikely, and he has fifteen more years to go. I don't want to think about all the performances he must have given in there in order to survive. Sometimes, he'd call me up in the middle of the night, probably using a bootlegged phone, although I've told him many times that there are proper hours for calling people up. *Since when did we ever do things properly*, he'd say, and I could absolutely imagine that smirk on his face. Somehow, it touches me that he never bothered to put on a façade when it came to me. I don't think he had ever set out to deceive me, although he had spun Mom in circles over the years.

D'you ever feel as if there are worms digging through your brain, he said another night, and for some reason it was absolutely quiet from his end, as if he was just lounging in his own apartment contemplating the universe. *Sometimes*, I said, *when I don't have enough things to do*.

Not even the drugs help, he says. *Even in those Moments when I'd be seeing colors along the walls and everything feels like it's underwater, the worms are still in there burrowing just beneath my scalp; they don't care that I'm still alive. Sometimes, they transform, and I can feel their little thorny feet scuttling about and the loud clicking of those pinchers, and not even hitting my head against the wall could make them go away. And then I'd take another hit, and the insects they start to fly and buzz around, riding the waves with me. But they never leave. They never, ever leave*.

I was quiet for a Moment, because what can be said in reply to that? So I said, *I'm sorry*, and then he said, *I know*. And then he hung up. Another time he called me up, in the afternoon, mercifully, to ask to tell him a childhood story as if he didn't grow up with me. So I told him about that time we snuck out to swim in the big house's pool down the road, the largest house in our neighborhood and was said to be owned by an OFW, but no one ever lived in it. There had been rumors that the family didn't expect to be bunking with low-class folk around them and never even bothered to move in, although someone seemed to be maintaining the property nonetheless, because the pool would always be filled up every first Friday of the month, and nobody knew why.

We could see the inside of the property, because it was surrounded by tall, wooden slats, and it was easy for little faces to peer in.

So we pretended to go to school, and then it was easy enough to climb the back wall of the house, because it was unkempt and they didn't put those prison-like wires on top. We stripped off our uniforms and down to our underwear and jumped in the pool. We both didn't know how to swim so it was a matter of staying near the walls, splashing each other with water that tasted like rust. After some time, my brother decided he wanted to see the inside of the house. As usual, as the voice of reason, I warned him that this was a bad idea. We didn't know if they had dogs and stuff. But my brother at the time had gotten away with so many things that he probably thought trespassing was a minor sin.

So we got dressed, and I followed him inside the house through a sliding glass door facing the pool. The house barely had anything in it and whatever furniture was there was covered in yellowing sheets. They look like aged ghosts scattered in the corners. I told my brother that we should leave, but he placed his hand on my mouth. *Hear that*, he asked. I shook my head, and he placed a finger against his lips and beckoned me to follow him down the hall.

I must admit that I've always been skittish (my brother would say "feral"), and the mere thought of going down a dim hallway of an abandoned house made me want to bolt out right there and then. But there was no hesitation in my brother's lithe movements, the surety of his long, lean legs, as if he was a house cat pretending to stalk a toy mouse.

The nearer we approached the door at the end of the hall, the louder noise grew, until we couldn't ignore that it was the sound of someone crying. My brother, without even stopping to think about his life choices, pushed the door open.

There was a girl crouched by the bed.

She looked older than us, but I couldn't really be sure, because she was cowering and shivering. When she realized that there were other people in the room, she looked at us and cried harder. *Help me*, she said. And that's when we noticed that she was handcuffed to the bedpost. She wasn't wearing any shoes and it seemed that she had been wearing her school uniform for a few days now. My brother didn't hesitate. He went to the nearest table and tried to look for the key, all calm as if Mom had just asked him to buy something from Aling Teresita.

I was too scared to look properly at the girl, who was still looking up at us and pleading. I looked around the room instead, and there was a large video camera on a stand by the corner and an old computer on the table with a pile of unlabeled CDs right next to it. I knew that something bad was happening in that room, but I

couldn't bring myself to imagine what it was. Finally, my brother gave up his search among the CDs and crouched next to the girl. *We'll come back*, he said. *I promise, we'll get you out*. And I've never seen him so self-assured, as if he knew what exactly was needed to be done. The girl whimpered and clutched on his sleeve. *Hurry, before he comes back*, she sobbed, and went back to her weeping.

My brother only nodded and grabbed my arm as we ran out of the house. We went over the wall, and my brother ran to the nearest *barangay tanod* post. I thought no one was going to believe him, because there he was in his wet clothes during school hours, and everyone knew about our mother, and everyone thought we deserved our fate. But the *tanods* went with him to the house, after he told me to stay put.

It was all over the news afterward. You could look it up if you want, you'd still find articles about it for sure. It was a sensational story. We were awarded medals and plaques from the local government and got scholarships. Our neighbors put up a large tarpaulin with our pictures near our house to brag about how we were born and raised in Barangay Santiago. We couldn't help it; it got into our heads. Even Mom didn't yell at us that much and would often stop and retell the events of that morning to the neighbors congregating at Aling Teresita's, as if she had been in that room with us.

My big brother and I, we felt like we had gone through a furnace and had come out shinier than gold, as if we had passed an initiation period with flying colors. Initiation for what, I didn't know, but it sure felt as if we had grown up overnight. I was proud of him, of how levelheaded he was that day and how confidently he called for help, as if there was absolutely no chance that adults would ever dismiss a mere child. He had always possessed such a natural charm, one that I couldn't replicate no matter how much DNA and history we shared. We would often talk about that morning over the years, when we were lying on our beds at night, in hushed whispers, as if commemorating a great journey. We were so proud to have saved a life.

But now I feel the laughing sting of irony, because in the end, we wouldn't be able to save ours.

MY BROTHER FINALLY COMES out. He had shaved his head. I didn't recognize him at first, until he called my name after I just stared right through him. I stand up to greet him. It's always awkward, because I don't know if I should hug him, especially today, as it might be the last time I would see him. He seems to have guessed my dilemma, because he goes straight to the other side of the table and sits on the bench, facing me.

Fancy meeting you here, he says with a laugh. I can't help but smile warmly at him, he's such a fool. *I thought you'd wait until next year or something*, he adds.

Don't be dramatic, I say. *I was here a month ago*.

Were you? I'm sure I would have remembered if you were.

Not to mention you always called me during ungodly hours.

You'll never be angry at me, he says, after a while. *You can't possibly be*.

Of course, he's right. For all of his attempts at dragging me into his self-destruction, I could never harden my heart against him. He was my only ally even when he was also my enemy. Our lives are so coiled around each other that to hate him would be to hate myself. We understand each other so well; it's both our strength and weakness.

How are they treating you in there, I say.

Oh, they got tired of beating me up. I knew it was only a matter of time before they went back to their porn videos. He is tracing the wood pattern on the table.

There's nothing like charging into battle. *Listen*, I say, *I enrolled in the Program*.

His head whips his head up and he studies my face. And just when I think he will rebuke me, he says, *I see*.

Of course, he understands. How could I ever have doubted him? My lips are suddenly too dry for my liking, and I can't manage to look him in the eye. I realize that I'm feeling embarrassed, because I'm showing him just how weak I am. But he couldn't have been surprised at that? Surely, he always knew that he was stronger than me in all aspects?

You're leaving, then, he says. And to my horror, his voice is breaking as if he's trying hard not to sob. I still don't look him in the eye, addressing his finger that's still tracing invisible patterns.

I'm off to see Mom after this, I say.

The finger suddenly stops. I finally glance up at him and he's looking at me. *You'll send her my love?*

I say, *of course. Anyway, she knows, silly*.

His eyes have gotten damp, much to my terror. *Do you know, I'm actually happy that she's gotten old. I thought maybe then she could forget a lot of things, like how I broke her heart*, he says. I'm a coward, so I look down at the table again. *Please tell me you forgive me*, he adds. And it feels as if he's the one who's saying goodbye.

I always have, I say. Then, *Will you forgive me, too?*

He puts his hand against my cheek and lifts my face. *You tried so hard. You fought as much as you could. You're the one who has to live that life, and you're doing what you think is best. What is there to forgive?*

I close my eyes. There is so much more that I want to ask his forgiveness for. But how to confess now? And is it even worth it? And if I'm already atoning for my sins in my own way, surely he can be spared the pain of knowing? I start crying as I clutch his hand. I can't help it. For one Moment, he seems to be that confident boy so many years ago, and I can almost believe that he could save another life.

Say it anyway, I tell him.

I forgive you, he says.

I'm a coward, so I leave that room unforgiven. Or rather, forgiven for the wrong sin. They say that forgiveness is the most freeing thing that one will ever experience in a lifetime. But right now, it feels as if someone just tightened a noose around my neck. I realize then that what I've been anticipating for most of my life, is for someone to finally pull down the lever.

Outside, the sun is at its highest point on the sky. I grit my teeth against the onslaught of shame unleashing a forest fire in my innards.

I'M LYING DOWN ON a decent mattress in an inn. All the lights are off, and the complete darkness is comforting. I've always been fond of the dark. To me, it's a time-out, a place where you can hide and retreat. There's something very cozy about being surrounded by pitch black, like floating on a calm galaxy, although some people would think otherwise. Nothing is ever purely bad, even something as traditionally feared as darkness. Even a monster has its friends. Anyway, I enjoy the quiet as much as I can, as there will be a long road ahead and an even longer week.

I thought I wasn't going to make it into this town until much later tonight, but the roads have been kind, which gave me much unease. Where was the traffic? The long lines of buses and trucks and cars looking like mismatched blocks of a never-ending train? Am I the only one who's leaving the city? I find that hard to believe. I think if we all could, we'd all be hopping in our cars and driving out into some deserted road or field to scream our heads off or ask God for a rewind, a redo, another chance. A miracle. If he could just change our lives even for a second, what a reprieve it would be.

But there's work tomorrow, and we have to get kids to school and restock our canned goods, so maybe we'll just scream in our heads.

I wanted to keep driving, especially now when the roads seem to be mine alone. I used to be able to drive all night long if necessary, but now I tire easily. Mom used to say to never drive along an empty highway by myself, but I always thought those

are the best times to drive. Everything is a smooth, dark blanket, and you never can really see far enough, but you just keep going, anyway. And once in a while, the lights of the convenience stores beckon to you like that miraculous star in Bethlehem, and it feels like you're one star nearer to your home, or to wherever you need to go. And if you never waver, you might even arrive sooner than expected.

What is scary to me is to never have an end destination. I cannot imagine anyone wanting to be immortal. Imagine a long, dark road that you have to traverse for all eternity without an end in sight. Imagine everyone you love dying, until you're the only one left who knows your birthday or your favorite food or what you did that Christmas Eve five years ago. No one lives out of context. If one day you look in the mirror and no longer recognize the person you see, then are you even really alive?

I close my eyes and try to sleep. I imagine the darkness like a woolen blanket tucking in around me and placing a kiss on my forehead. Outside, a tree branch scrapes against my window, but gently. And just maybe, if this day keeps ending right, even the dreams will keep their distance. I imagine them lined up outside the window, transforming into my brother, peeking through the slats, reaching in to try to grab me.

Why did you betray me, he says. Why did you turn me in?

Betray. Traitor. Both from the Latin word *tradere*. The act of handing over.

For your own good, I say.

He shakes his head. *Was it? Or was it for yours?*

I close my eyes and try to will him away. Surely, apparitions can be driven off by sheer logic and a cocktail of medicines in one's bloodstream? But when I open my eyes, he's now standing by the foot of the bed, watching me. He crawls up next to me and lays on his side, facing me. We stare at the variation of browns in each other's eyes. He whispers, as if afraid of the words that are about to come: *The mind is the worst prison. It's a dungeon of memories we carry with us no matter how far we run. We try to escape from it, day in and day out, only to be dragged back at night. What a terrible, terrible fate it is to be alive.*

I feel the hot trail of tears from my cheek to the pillowcase. *Forgive me, I say.*

But then, I am alone, and there is only silence.