

Penance

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EVERY LIE I tell about my mother is but an attempt to save her.

I like to start by describing how, on that February morning, Mama quickly bundles me up in a jacket and takes me to EDSA to join her friends from the theater. I always stress in my story that I am the only child in the group, but that Mama has no choice. She cannot leave me in the house alone. Her assistant, Laura, has taken to the streets too. Mama would never forgive herself if she didn't register her dissent. So, on February 23, 1986, Mama steps out of the apartment in Roxas District, Quezon City, and walks all the way to EDSA, via Ortigas Avenue, her twelve-year-old daughter, yours truly, in tow.

I have a large print of this iconic photograph of Mama's fierce contemporaries—playwrights, stage actors, writers, *mga artista ng bayan*, the nation's artists, arm in arm, hosed down by strong bursts of water, shielding the people from evil government forces. This beautiful, inspiring photo hangs above my desk, in my dorm room in the university.

My mom is not in the photo. Neither am I.

I am really in Leyte, hometown to my mom and to the dictator's wife. Years later, I am so successful at overlaying this fact with my own cover-up that I manage to erase my memory of the time spent there almost completely. All in an effort to hide my

embarrassment at the inglorious grief of my complicit family for the deposed despot. And no, I do this not for love of country. I do this for a tall, lanky, pale-skinned boy, in big-frame glasses, clad in the most impossible color combinations.

Sison Santo. *Son of a true-blue, honest-to-goodness labor unionist*, a classmate who catches me staring, whispers to me. *He is the incoming chairperson of The Org, hotbed of future national party leaders.*

First name Sison, as in the famous exile and movement founder who went underground in '68? She tells me it is indeed Sison, last name Santo. A last name for a first name! Do you know that Sison in Spanish means "sandpiper," but is also derogatory term for ... never mind. But Santo means saint. Wow, some name. Very revolutionary, very cool. She scoffs at the trivial observation.

But I do think that SS is, for lack of a better term, indeed very cool. There is an overall, well, deficiency, an unstudied lack of deliberateness, in his manner of dressing. Even in the context of '90s grunge, his carelessness is of a different caliber altogether: blue gym shorts paired with a generic maroon shirt bearing the university logo and frayed leather sandals. The color combination grates on the eyes. Eyes that watch him nonetheless in rapt attention. I find myself making excuses for the fashion gaffe, ascribing a dignified quality to the brand of carelessness he carries.

He remains quiet and composed amid the crowd yelling for the downfall of US imperialism and bureaucrat capitalism. He is clear, lucid, when it is his turn to speak. *This abomination, this mechanism through which the ruling elite exploits government machinery and resources, to further enrich themselves and entrench their families in power, at the expense of the people ...*

He is everything my family is not.

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I am eleven years old when, against my will, my mother brings me to the island of Leyte, to abandon me to her family in Tacloban City, while she goes off someplace with her friend, the dance choreographer, Teresing. To this day, it is still unclear to me where they really went, what they did, why my mom left me with her family. I do know that some people go on journeys, return to their roots to reestablish connections, find answers to lingering mysteries, or clues to puzzles. I have seen this depicted in various ways in the many books I've read. In my case, I return to Tacloban only to find more questions, more incongruities, more anomalies, whereas life was perfectly fine when it was only Mama and me in our little house in Roxas District, Quezon City.

I had been to the island before, as a small child, but have very little recollection of that first visit. I vaguely remember the trips to the Red Beach, the smell of boiled bananas and of the burnt rubber that I associate with afternoon sun showers, but which could have just been steam emanating from asphalt pavements.

Mama showed me some of the photos from that earlier visit, and I remarked at how everyone in the photo has a wide forehead and a remarkably tall nose but flaring nostrils. She laughed gleefully at my observation but told me never to bring it up when I see the relatives in person. *We should be thankful we didn't get the nose, the forehead is something we can live with*, she tells me often.

We arrive in Tacloban in the summer of 1985. The first of April, in fact. That should have clued me in on what was in store for me, what a joke it all was, being in Tacloban. Plus, it was also the day after Palm Sunday, start of Semana Santa. There was an added layer of silence and stillness, if not severity, to the small provincial city.

The sun is vicious, and the air is warm and moist. The city is surrounded by so much water. You can smell the sea everywhere. Early evenings are covered in a kind of blue I have not seen anywhere else. Tacloban Blue, I start calling it.

Tio Marcello meets us at the airport to bring us to Tio Julio's house. He tries to carry me, and I push at him. He wears a mildly hurt expression. He says he used to carry me and my cousin Dani, one on each arm, when we were babies.

I'm almost eleven, Tio Marcello! He opens his arms, *how about a hug?* And I allow him to engulf me in his arms and belly, and in his perfume, which I now remember liking the smell of, ever since I was a kid.

In Tio Julio's house, I am surprised to see a lot of people, but all of them speaking in hushed tones and moving about with a kind of measured and restrained coordination. A man with long braided hair, tattooed arms, and remarkably muscular chest is speaking to Tio Julio in the balcony. Something about crucifixion, *puasa, pentinensya*. Tio Julio gets up to give us kisses and hugs, and tells us to wait a while in the sala, while he talks to his guest.

It is a big house with an airy living room, wraparound balconies, and wide staircases. The two trees in front of the house are framed nicely by full, non-opening, picture windows, and the glare of the sun outside is barely shielded by flimsy, white curtains.

Mama tells me that the house has only been around since after The War. The original was completely ruined. This is merely a replica. I am still trying not to speak to her, to keep up my crossness with her, but I like the word "replica," and it is difficult to feign disinterest. It is becoming apparent, based on the conversation she had in

the car with Tio Marcello, that the stay in Tacloban is going to be indefinite. I look around me surreptitiously and try not to betray any expression.

Daniel, aka Dan, aka Danielito, aka Intoy, aka Dan-dan, aka Dana, and to me, eventually, Dani, Tio Julio's son, comes sliding down the balusters of the winding staircase. He runs to Mama, who hugs him to her bosom tightly and drops many little kisses on the top of his head. I am annoyed.

You remember Danielito? Uy ha, you used to sleep in the same kuna when you were babies! I only have very nebulous memories. *You bit me in the ear on my fourth birthday,* he tells me. He shows me a tiny, barely perceptible scar. That one I remember. Dan-dan, I used to call him. He makes a face or tries to. *Ugh, just Daaan, please.* Thick eyebrows and long eyelashes, wavy brown hair, impossibly straight teeth. He is beautiful, even when he has everyone's cursed flaring nostrils. I become conscious of my matted hair, the gap in my front teeth.

I am pushed to Dan, who offers to show me the room assigned to Mama and me. I grudgingly follow him up the stairs, eyes straying to the many photos lining the wall on the landing, surprised to see a portrait of the Madame and the president among our own family's portraits. Are we related to them? I want to ask Dani, but he is keen to get to the room.

The room we are given faces the street and has a huge window. The street view is partly covered by branches of one of the front-yard trees teeming with the reddest water apples, *tambis*. The windows also afford a good enough view of the spires and the bell tower of the Santo Niño Church, the tops of acacia trees in Rizal Plaza, and the blue open sea just a couple of meters beyond it.

Dan tells me he likes coming to this room, to spy on the people walking to or coming from church. He says he hopes he can still do it, even with us occupying the room. He likes to climb the tree from this window and drop little branches and fruits at passersby. *But why would you do that?* I feign disdain. *But why not?* he says, grinning. My pursed mouth cracks into a smile, and I forget about my teeth gap.

Dan says the man talking to his dad is Christopher, aka Cristo, aka Toper, depending on the time of the year, or on his current pre/occupation. *Toper, not Tsuper? Ha ha ha.* Dani looks at me blankly, not getting it. *Tsuper, chauffer, driver? Get it?* He tries not to smile, *ugh, baduy, corny*, and gets on with the orientation: Cristo-slash-Toper is a client of Tio Julio's. An ex-convict, now tricycle driver, occasional street chess player, *masiao* gambling collector, Frank Sinatra impersonator, and a devotee of the crucified Christ. Ever since he got out of jail, he has made a *panata*, a commitment: On Good Fridays, he carries a heavy wooden cross around the city, self-flagellates, and is crucified on the hill in Barangay Serene, overlooking San

Juanico Strait. Tio Julio, and other sinners who can afford it, I suppose, sponsor his performance, his penitensya, every year.

I am aghast. *Why would Cristo-Toper do that?* Mama sent me to a Catholic school but did not raise me a proper Catholic, or so some of the nuns claim. We never went to mass unless the school required it. But I have always been fascinated with the rituals and now with these new things I am hearing from Dan.

He does that for our sins, Dan says, laughing, himself not convinced. *On Friday, we will see. People come from out of town to watch him bleed and die, after the Siete Palabras. Then he is resurrected, and we have a party in the house.*

At dinner, I overhear Mama telling my *tias* that she plans to enroll me in the Laboratory School so I can attend the Academy of the Arts, where Dan also goes. The school is a flagship project of the Madame, and my mom apparently helped set up the Academy. I sulk and mope around in the days that follow, never letting an occasion pass to remind her of how aggrieved I am at having been pulled out of my old school in Quezon City. My mom assures me that this is temporary, only while she is helping her friend, Teresing, put together a show called *Benedicta* for Madame First Lady and her foreign guests, so they will continue to fund the Academy.

I am getting sick of this Madame. I can't avoid the large portrait featuring her big hair and her butterfly sleeves, surrounded by the president and the rest of the first family. The photo hangs next to those of my mom's real family, just below a bleeding Sacred Heart of Jesus, whose sad eyes look deeply into my own and follow my every movement. I don't mind sad-eyed Jesus so much. It is the smiling Madame who bothers me more. There is no avoiding her. I see her prominent face every single day when I wake up and before going to bed.

It is my mom whom I barely see. I am not prepared for her long absences.

The first time I wake up alone, I am gutted. I frantically leave the bedroom and go up and down the house, looking for her. I try very, very hard not give in to tears though, aware of Dani observing me. When it becomes clear that she is indeed *gone, waray dinhi, not here, lumakat*, a huge, hollow space opens inside my body. And then it squeezes all the air into it, and turns everything dark. The sensation is as though I have been let go in the middle of the abyss that is in the middle of my stomach. Hard to explain, even now. But that is how I remember feeling. Years and years later, when it was my turn to always be *gone, waray dinhi, not here, lumakat*, it remains a feeling my adult body somehow reserves especially for things related to Mama.

She would sometimes come home but only very late at night. Always, I am alerted to her smell, her presence in the room, even in the middle of a very deep sleep. In these late hours, in my somnolence, all my anger evaporates and I am a little

child again. I fold into her narrow body tightly when she slips into bed and gathers me in her arms. In the morning, when she is once more *gone, not here*, the hollow space in my belly eats me up yet again. I revert to being angry, lost, disconsolate. *Aburido, tulos*, I hear the maids, Wina and Maring, whispering with slight scorn their diagnosis of my predilection. I am an added burden to them, none of their tricks in the kitchen distracts me from my dark moods.

In Mama's absence, Tia Alma, her spinster cousin, and Tia Nene, Dani's mom, take turns fawning over me, with the support of the household helpers. Everyone but Dan speaks to me in halting, accented Tagalog. I do not tell them that I am fluent in Waray and can say the Holy Rosary in Cebuano. I enjoy the attention, that, I cannot deny. I find it fascinating to be surrounded by so many people, even if none of them is Mama. Even if they are all a bit crazy in varying degrees.

In the house in QC, it is mostly just Mama and me. Or, Laura, Mama's assistant, when they have to work together on something. There are occasional parties, friends of Mama's sometimes sleep over. Some mornings I find them sprawled in the living room, wasted, next to pools of vomit. Other times they are busy making breakfast, playing the piano, singing, ready to start another round of drinking. None of them have children, and I suspect none of them know or care to know how to behave around kids. I like having them around. But it is also nice when it is just Mama and me.

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That entire first week in Tacloban, I am in agony. *Just like Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, kinahanglan mag-antos*, Tia Alma declares. Not only has Mama abandoned me to these crazies, there is also nothing else to do in the house. Dani and I are not allowed to watch TV, listen to FM radio, speak or laugh aloud, sing or dance or play, or eat tender juicy hotdog and Ma-ling luncheon meat. Only vegetables and fish, absolutely no meats or sweets, during the puasa.

On the fifth day, Good Friday, I am awakened by Dani pulling excitedly at my arm. He tells me to hurry if I want to see Cristo-slash-Toper in action, the procession will be passing by the house.

By the time we go down, a crowd has gathered along the entire stretch of Juan Luna Street. Some people have set up low tables, mini altars, in front of their houses, each one bearing a picture, a tiny sculpture, or a simple rebulto, of the crucified Christ.

In a short while, they appear: Several Jesuses of varying shapes and sizes, each one demonstrating his or her own style and severity of scourging. But the main one, Cristo-slash-Toper, truly stands out, his long hair plastered to his head by

a crown of thorns, his tattoos all covered up by lash wounds, and deep red blood oozing from them.

Look, here he comes, Dani can barely contain his excitement. Cristo, wearing nothing but what looks to me like a diaper over his crotch, stops in front of Tio Julio's house, suddenly drops to his knees, bows his head, and starts lashing at his chest, his back, every part of his body that his whip can reach. At some point the whip sticks to his thigh, and he has to pull at it, peeling off part of his skin. I see fresh blood trickling down his thigh. My stomach clenches involuntarily. Dani shrieks and goes over to Cristo to touch him.

The sun is in full force. The top of my head feels like there are hot coals on it, but my hands are strangely cold. I hear drum beats and then realize it is only my heart, palpitating wildly. I see Mama, I call out to her, but she transforms into Tia Alma who is running into the middle of the crowd to try to stop Dan, who has managed to touch Cristo's wound and is waving his bloody finger at me. I cannot stop the heavy, dark sack from being dropped over me. I see only wisps and undulating shapes, instead of people. I cannot breathe properly, and then it is all darkness.

When I come to, I am in the sala, laid out on the sofa, the women of the house all over me, Mama not among them. Dani is sulking in a corner, looking guiltily at me. He himself has received a few lashes of Tio Julio's thick leather belt, and is not allowed to come near me.

Outside, a drizzle has started in the middle of the blazing hot afternoon, and the faint smell of burnt rubber pervades the air, tickles the insides of my nostrils. I try my best not to laugh; I end up sneezing loudly and startling the tias into action.

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Things start to get better when school opens and after Dani and I are invited to classmates' parties, some of which are quite lavish. They would hold poolside parties at the Leyte Park Hotel or book the entire MacArthur Park Beach Resort. Not even my richest classmates in the private, catholic Quezon City grade school I used to attend held such extravagant celebrations. Most of my classmates in the Tacloban school are the sons and daughters of either local government officials or good friends of the Madame, Dan tells me. Cronies, I would later learn to use this word, and with a misplaced sense of pride.

In December, we hear about calls for the impeachment of the president. Impeachment. We keep hearing the word all week. It is all over the news. Our Social Studies teacher explains to us what impeachment means: *Nothing to do with*

peaches or peachment. It's this bad thing, it's disrespectful, it sets the wrong precedent for generations to come.

I also start using the word "impeachment" and agree with my teacher that the impeachment will result in the wrong president replacing the right one, until Dani corrects me, gloating in my face. *Precedent, not president.*

As the snap election fever heats up all over the country, we hold mock polls in the classroom, too, and ostracize anyone who isn't for the president. There is one kid, Les, who doesn't toe the line, who says the most outlandish things. Les has the gall to say that this man is evil and that he has killed many people, stolen lots of money. I have heard similar things said about the Marcoses previously, in my old school. But never in Tacloban. *That stuff is taboo here*, Dani says.

Les's mom was a teacher at the Tacloban campus of the state university, and one of the few locals who went underground, joined the "movement." Mama and Les's mom went to high school together, *but she became a radical, she used to be such a beauty too*, Mama tells me.

I look at the photograph of them together, in girly uniforms, hugging books close to their chests, Mama wearing cat's eye glasses frames, looking so glam, even then. There is a pretty girl, standing next to Mama, lithe and tall, hair in a bun. Les's mom. *She was a few batches younger, wrote poetry, played the guitar, daughter of a Judge, had a bright future ...*

We would later find out that Les's mom is captured by the PC, the Philippine Constabulary, while on fieldwork in the hills of Northern Samar. She never returns. Les eventually, mysteriously, disappears too. When the *Doña Paz* vessel sinks the following year, with only a handful of the more than four thousand passengers surviving, rumors spread that Les and her grandmother are among the unfortunate victims. We even pray for their souls, light candles at school. Though some oldies say the tragedy is part of a curse, bad karma, for what the country and people like Les's family did to the Madame and her family. Cruelty and ignorance go together beautifully, I learn very early. Turns out Les and her *lola* were not even on the ship. She moved to the south, to Mindanao, where her grandmother is from.

When I meet Les again in university, six years later, I avoid her at all cost. Easy enough to do, at first, since our circles almost never intersect. But not for long. Just like what I learned in Math: *The intersection of two circles determine a line known as the radical line. If three circles mutually intersect in a single point, their point of intersection is the intersection of their pairwise radical lines, known as the radical center.*

I still don't know what that means, mathematically. But, my circle, Les's, and SS, the boy I become obsessed with in college, do eventually intersect in the radical center,

in the student organization that the boy leads. The very same one in which I decide to become a worthy member. Thus, accounting for my mom's heroic involvement in the world's most peaceful revolution, handog ng Pilipino sa mundo, the Filipinos' gift to the world, as the famous song from this period goes. An involvement which I fantastically conjured.

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Throughout February, during the snap elections, there is a flurry of activity in Tio Julio's house. Relatives from far-flung towns start arriving in droves, appearing in a snap, like magic, like the election results. Tio Marcello, Tio Julio's right-hand man, along with his office staff, former colleagues, body guards, set up camp in the living room. There are a lot of hangers-on too, neighbors who just want to watch TV with us, get free food, drink coffee.

It is like a never-ending party. Day and night, they are there, walking about, eating, smoking, drinking tuba and rum, and copious amounts of Nescafe. They watch TV, listen to the radio, huddle around *The Daily Express*, curse loudly, and then all of a sudden someone, usually Cristo-slash-Toper, would start strumming the guitar, and they automatically revert to singing. *And now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain ...* Other times, an argument ensues, and fistfights actually break out. It is difficult to predict what the next act is going to be. I figure this is what the snap election fever is about. Everyone must, at some point, just snap. And I have to play my part.

Dan and I can sense the excitement, the anxiety, in the air, but none of the adults ever takes the time to explain things to us. No one pays attention to us, no one bothers us. I teach myself to get used to Mama's absence. *Still out with Teresing*, my aunts tell me. *She's working on the show for the Madame ... very important to showcase beauty and grace amid all the gore ...*

It would be several more weeks until I see Mama. By then, EDSA has happened, the family's world has been turned upside down, my uncles' businesses all closed down, their power and influence in the city completely gone. My mom's show is never mounted, she and Tita Teresing part ways, lie low for a long while, hoping everyone won't remember the work they did for what people now are calling the conjugal dictatorship.

Years later, I learn to take advantage of this lacuna in my mother's career. It allows me to fantasize that Mom's and Tita Teresing's final work together was actually the most revolutionary show never staged in the Philippines. In my

version, Mom and her friend had been planning all the while to subvert the show's message and embarrass their former friend, Meldy, in front of all her guests in her very own home.

I get so invested in this fantasy that I sometimes convince myself that it is not entirely baseless. When I look back on those days, I remember that Mama did have a distracted, disappeared look about her. She was visibly restless and anxious about something, even before EDSA happened. I always thought it was the show. She gets that way all the time, a kind of controlled, understated mania underlining her actions, when an important show is in the horizon.

She is the exact opposite, when there is nothing for her to work on. On such days I feel, and almost hate, her heavy presence: on the bed when she lingers too long curled up in her corner, on the sofa smoking one cigarette after another, on the dining table stoic and staring into space, absentmindedly picking invisible cooties from her hair. Her heaviness sinks into me, and I have to carry it, and her, around with me, yet all the while I am invisible to her. There, but not there. A more worrying kind of disappearance, than gone, not here, I sometimes feel. But it is probably only in Tacloban where I start to learn to live in fear of her possible, permanent absence.

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I learn many other things during this short period, thanks mainly to my mentor, Dani. I learn to smoke unfinished cigarettes left in overflowing ash trays, down rum without following it up immediately with Coca Cola, drink *tuba* without puking. I also learn that two of the household staff—George, Tio Julio's driver and Manang Wina, the cook—are having an affair.

Dani and I are hiding out in the kitchen one night, to smoke stolen cigarettes, when we sense movements and hear strange rasping and heavy breathing coming from behind the kitchen. We immediately put out our cigarettes, afraid that Tia Nene would catch us smoking. Dan peeks through the slats of the grill area and starts laughing but covering his mouth so he doesn't emit any sound. He pulls me in to show me what he sees that is so laughable.

I see scraggy George—unmistakable in his scragginess—looking to me like he's trying to climb up Manang Wina's wide hips and shoulders, squeezing her fat arms and breasts desperately, for support. *What, what are they doing?* I ask Dani, although I can feel my skin prickling, my senses getting more alert, despite not having the right reference for the strange, convoluted series of actions I am seeing. *Oh come on, what do you think?* Dani laughs. *We'll get them for this.*

Dani and I spy on them every night, against the corner of the outhouse kitchen. We use our knowledge of their affair to blackmail George, who grudgingly gives Dani and me five pesos every day when he drops us off at the school gate on Independencia Street. We use our extra money to buy Bazooka Joe bubble gum, whose wrappers bearing Archie comic strips we like to collect.

I also learn that one of my spinster aunts has a secret library of romance and smutty novels between her cabinet and the en suite bathroom. I discover this when I am looking for a costume to wear to a school presentation. Mama has promised to put together a costume for me but, as usual, she gets the dates mixed up. I only have a day to go before I can have anything to use, and she is still nowhere to be found.

Tia Alma tells me to look in the carton on top of her cabinet. I climb the cabinet and am flicking off spider webs and thick layers of dust that cling to my sweaty arms when I notice a not-so-narrow space between the cabinet and the wall of the bathroom. I look down to discover row upon row of books stacked on the floor. I get Dan to help me move the heavy antique cabinet, and lo and behold, multiple towers of Mills and Boon, Barbra Cartland, Sydney Sheldon, Harold Robbins, and Silhouette Romance novels.

We squeeze ourselves into the tiny, dark alley of books, squinting at the titles, grimy and sweat trickling down our sticky faces, arms, and back. I pull out a book which says *Carpetbaggers* and scan the first few pages. Dan grabs it from me and tells me to go straight to the middle of the book. He shows me the page, we both read the lines aloud, and start laughing, squeaking. Eww! Yuck!

In university, later on, Dan confesses to me that that night after we read that book, he cannot sleep, his imagination is assaulted by images of the Howard-Hughes-like character's body, movements, acts. And he touches himself until he falls asleep, dreaming of himself as both the man and the woman in the sex scenes we read.

I remember having nightmares that night too. The images and letters somehow encrypted themselves in my brain, such that every time I close my eyes, I see the words dancing, blending into each other much like George's body melding with Manang Wina's. I swear I can taste the sound of them, feel the syrupy thickness of the words on my mouth, even when I am not so sure what acts or body parts the words refer to. I remember giving up on sleep and running to Tia Alma's room. I let her hug me tight, my heart palpitating wildly. I finally break down when she says she will pray with me. I let her think I am crying because I miss Mama. I am wracked with guilt. I know I will never have a chance at heaven after this. *Shh, shh, it's just a dream, Inday, your mom will be here soon, let's pray: Angel of God, my guardian dear ...*

When I visit Dan in Brooklyn, twenty-five years later, both of us in our late thirties, I am still the only one he has told about this, and I am the only one from the family whom his partner, Sam, has met. I say nothing and stop myself from persuading him to *come out to the family, to the world, damn them all to hell*. He is also the only one in my family who knows of my indiscretions, my defunct marriage to Carlos. Neither does he try to persuade me to get the marriage annulled. But we never tire of talking and laughing about those steamy afternoons behind the closet, the nights in the outhouse kitchen, and our silly, pitiful, repressed aunts, and our macho, affectionate, chauvinist uncles.

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On the morning of February 23, the start of the 1986 bloodless revolution, as people pour into the streets of Manila to block the tanks of the Philippine Army and the Marines deployed by the dictator, I wake up to find blood on my bed. I scream and scream. Tia Alma helps me get cleaned up. I beg her not to tell Dan and the other cousins, *please, please, Ta Alma, please*.

I am itchy all over, I want to scratch at my groin, but I am deathly afraid of blood. The bleeding doesn't stop. I want to hide in my room all day. Tia Alma tells me that *this is a moment to celebrate. In some historic cultures, a menstruating woman is considered sacred, powerful!* She tells me that I will notice an increase in my psychic abilities, and that I may even be strong enough to *heal the sick, cure the ailments of this nation!* She is referring to the bad things that protesters in Manila are doing to our beloved president and the Madame. She starts crying, while showing me how to use a sanitary napkin. I cry as well. I am angry at my mom for leaving me in this crazy house, with these crazy people. I blame her for my untimely bleeding.

You mean, I have to do this, every month, from now on?! I cannot control my emotions. This is the worst day of my life! I don't deserve this! Why did this happen to me? Why, why, why?!

Tia Alma coaxes me out of the room and gives me a warm bath. She also explains to me that from now on, I cannot take showers with Dan, or with the other boy cousins anymore. I should guard my *femininity, pagkababaye*. I snort at this.

After my bath, Tia Alma makes me jump over three steps of the staircase, so that my menstrual period does not last longer than three days. I accidentally jump over the fourth step. *Ay, Gino!*, she slaps her forehead in dismay. Then she takes out my sullied undies and tries to convince me to smear the first blood on my face, so that I will not have a breakout every time my period comes. I run from the room, right

smack into Dani, with Tia Alma right behind me, blood on her hand. I pull Dani with me and we run to Tia Alma's room, squeezing ourselves between her cabinet and the bathroom.

Dani is puzzled but tries to comfort me, in his derisive Dani way. I scream at Tia Alma and threaten to stay there forever, unless she leaves me alone.

Come out of there, you two! You're not allowed in there!

This makes Dani laugh out loud, for some reason. *If Jen is not coming out of the closet, neither am I*, he says.

Come on, Inday, this is for your own good, please. Danielito, Intoy, please, don't indulge her, please ...

To this day, when Tia Alma sees us, sees the pimple scars on my face, she shakes her head, points an accusing finger at Dan, but mainly blames herself for not being more forceful.

On February 26, the fourth day of my menstruation, I wake up very early in the morning to Tia Alma's wailing. She and Tia Nene are going from room to room, banging on our doors, waking everyone up with *their cries*. *They're gone, they're gone, what are we going to do? What will happen to us now?*

When I come out of the room, the other tias are weeping too. We learn that the Madame and the Marcoses escaped to Hawaii the night before, and the widow of the slain senator, Aquino, has been declared President of the Philippines.

Dios ko, what is going to happen to us? Why have they abandoned us?! Señor Sto. Niño, have mercy on us!

Manang Wina is not in the kitchen. No one has prepared breakfast. I am very, very annoyed. Tio Marcello offers to go to Downtown, get me my favorite Belgium Bread. He asks if I want to come along. I am feeling super weepy and hungry; I only manage a nod. Tio Marcello looks for George, so he can drive us to town. George is also nowhere to be found.

Manang Wina and George took advantage of the chaos and eloped, we later find out. In hindsight, I think they probably also realized that the family would no longer be able to afford them, their services, after the dictator's downfall.

Tio Marcello drives the gray station wagon, and I sit in front next to him. The streets are still deserted, save for a few tricycles. We wave at Toper, who is leaning on his tricycle, waiting for passengers, near Plaza Rizal. The sun is just about to rise, and Tio Marcello says he wants to treat me to a drive down Magsaysay Boulevard, along the bay.

Sidlangan, sunrise. See how beautiful it is, Inday? It is indeed beautiful, magical—the calm open sea, the vivid globule of yellow-orange light rising from what seems

to be the edge of the water. But I am still cross with Mama, with everyone. I stare quietly at the sunrise, the sea, until we make a left to Downtown.

We go to Quality Bread Bakeshop and get my favorite pastry. I flatten one warm loaf between my palms, until I feel the raisins protruding and I claw them out, before taking a bite. Buttery, soft, sweetish, just the way I like it.

When Tio Marcello and I return, I see Dani sitting next to his dad, looking intent. I throw little pieces of bread at him to get his attention. He glowers at me. They are all in the living room, in front of the TV, stunned, faces swathed in cigarette smoke. But even through the smoke, I can see that Tio Julio is irate, spewing out curses, banging fists on knees. The other tios are red-faced, nostrils flaring, looking like they're about to cry. Or maybe they are still drunk from tuba. It is always hard to tell.

I stand at the back of the living room, munching on my Belgium Bread, every now and then standing on tiptoe to catch, between people's heads and shoulders, some broken images on TV. It looks like there is a major celebration in the streets of Manila, people are hugging and kissing each other, and dancing and throwing yellow graffiti in the air. I think I see some people from the theater, Mama's friends, but I could be wrong.

I miss Manila all of a sudden. I imagine Mama and me among the crowd, celebrating. Years later I will squeeze these images for all they are worth, deftly inserting Mama and me into the iconic tableau. But that morning in the sala, among my drunk and inconsolably bereaved relatives, I also sense a shift, I fear another major change oncoming.

I look out the window. Through the tambis and mango trees, I glimpse patches of very blue skies. The streets are still empty, soundless, like in Semana Santa, after the Siete Palabras, when Jesus is declared dead.

I feel something trickle down my thighs. I look down to see brownish red streaks marking my pale skin. I am unable to breathe properly. I am being smothered by a thick, dark, heavy blanket. I keep bleeding and bleeding, in the background the Tias keep wailing, and my mother is still nowhere to be found.