

# The Mendozas

**Neal Amandus Gellaco**

## **PART 1: PAPA**

MY ELDEST CHILD Manolo brought home a girl today. A morena with a bob cut and no visible breasts. She was wearing my son's Lakers' snapback—that I bought for him when he first started playing basketball—dark denim pants, and her own Jordans. My son brought home a tomboy.

“Mama, Papa, this is my girlfriend, Princess.”

My son's girlfriend is a tomboy. But I can't judge him—if that's what he likes, then that's what he likes. I had my own fair share of wild escapades when I was his age, and bedding a tomboy was not the worst of them.

“It's nice to meet you, Princess. Welcome to our home,” I said. Her hands were rough, and her grip was firm. Her handshake was manlier than my son's. But if that's what he wants, that's what he wants—God knows I'm not one to judge.

She told us that she went to the same school as Isabel and that they were classmates. Isabel's eyes went wide when she came down from her room and saw the sixth person at the dinner table, saying: “Oh, I know Princess.” Like she was acting surprised. Like the time I bought her a fluffy princess poodle doll and she gasped leaving no air for anyone else and then let it all out when she screamed thank you. Then I never saw her play with that doll afterward. All it did was accumulate dust in

the top shelf of her cabinet where she kept all the unwanted stuff she had no use for but it was rude to just throw them away.

“Princess plays basketball too—did she tell you already? I’ve been to some of her games, and I think she’s even better than Manolo.”

So Princess plays basketball and might even be better than Manolo. But being better than Manolo wasn’t much of an accomplishment—even JB was better than Manolo. While Isabel only intended to be mean and embarrass her *kuya* in front of his first girlfriend, she told the truth. He’ll never be the main player, the one everyone comes to watch play—hell, he might never even *play*, stuck forever in Team B. Trainees. Varsity Reserve. He’ll never be able to experience what I had back in the day—the thrill of competition, men against men, when nothing else mattered except who was the better man, when my skin pumped out sweat and my veins pumped out adrenaline nonstop, when in the distance my girl was cheering for me, shouting on the top of her lungs, filled with the same crazy energy I had down on the court, and when there would be congratulatory or commiseration sex afterward on the bleachers when the gym was cleared out.

“How’s your team’s shot at the championship this year, Princess?”

Before today, I didn’t even know they allowed girls to play in the senior high school level. I thought they were only allowed to play collegiate.

“I think we can defend the championship. Competition is not so tough, in my opinion.”

This Princess was more of the Manolo I wanted than Manolo ever was. Confident and assertive. I imagined *him* cheering for *her* (instead of the other way around) with a *cartolina* board decorated with cutouts of *her* face. There may or may not be after-game sex (security was stricter these days, but if he could manage it he should be able to score one for the other players on the team, if he’s lucky, some two on one action to make him a man again after being emasculated as a cheerleader).

“Princess and I will go upstairs for a while,” said Manolo after dinner.

It was during times like these when he was almost the Manolo I wanted him to be. Confident and assertive. This Princess was good for manning him up. I had wanted to give him condoms to celebrate the occasion, but Maribel said no. Giving him condoms is like giving permission to have sex, she said. You don’t give a motorcycle driver a helmet and expect him not to drive the motorcycle—it’s the same with sex. And then she said we don’t want him having sex, at least not until marriage. Thank God Maribel’s parents weren’t as strict on her when we were younger.

*We* turned out fine. There’s no reason Manolo wouldn’t. Maybe she’d forgotten all the times we had sex when we were younger, way before we were married, and still

we turned out fine. Or maybe she *did* remember and didn't want her son to become like the man she married, because *he* didn't turn out fine. I didn't know which was worse.

I went to sleep when I normally did, after *Bandila* when the night had finished its transition from noisy to quiet. Maribel stayed up to see Princess out, she said, and maybe clean out a few things she's always wanted to clean. The next day she told me that she couldn't sit still, waiting, and rushed to Manolo's room when she couldn't restrain herself anymore—she was worried and scared and anxious and all, thinking that Manolo was doing things he shouldn't have been doing. But his door was unlocked, and when she peeked inside the room was dark and its occupant was asleep and alone. There was a light from Isabel's room, and her door opened as Maribel was about to retire to bed. Out came Princess. She and Isabel had homework to do, she said and left at around midnight. I asked Maribel which she preferred: a tomboy daughter or a fornicating son. She didn't reply.

That day we went to Manolo's first-ever basketball game. Princess wasn't there. No cartolina banners were provided (or even needed as Manolo didn't need cheering for warming the bench). Still, he said he might play a bit in one quarter today, so Maribel said the entire family should come to support him. It was a Saturday. A pair of girls sat beside me on the bleachers carrying their cartolina with a flurry of pasted cutouts. They had balloons as well. Inflated golden numbers, a zero and a one. And personalized jerseys which both said "Cruz 01" in bold at the back. Maribel had one that said "Mendoza 07 back in the day. So did many others, so I had my pick, but in the end I made sure to choose the prettiest.

The game went on. JB was ecstatic when Manolo was called to play though he didn't understand that it was only to give "Cruz 01" some time to rest.

"Does this mean Kuya is out of reserb?"

He called it 'reserb' with a 'b' because Manolo was in Set B: Trainees. Rookies. Manolo hated the name 'reserb'. I told JB no.

Manolo's team won. No, Cruz 01's team won. I asked Manolo if he would go to the victory party because I knew that there's always a victory party, and I thought that he could use a night out with his team. I hoped the drinks and the sex would man him up.

"Uhm—Papa, *kasi*—only Varsity A can go," he said, stammering and whispering so he wouldn't be heard by others, but loud enough for us to hear, soft and shy like a snail with a long neck retreating inside its shell. It didn't work. Someone heard him and hugged him with one arm. He was a head shorter than Manolo. The hug forced him to crouch down. He was like a white Johnny Abarrientos but more handsome.

“Nah, dude, you can join,” said Cruz 01. What happened to “pare”—it was good enough for us, wasn’t it good enough for him? Millennials.

“Mama, Papa, this is Javi, the Captain.”

The pair beside me was still there. I decided that I liked Javi, that even if he was a millenal with his “nahs” and “dudes,” he was still the Captain and that was worth something. I liked him for Manolo. He was someone for Manolo to aspire to become. A great man once said, “There are many things we do not want. Let us not just mourn them. Let us change them.” It was not too late to change Manolo.

## PART 2: ATE

If you really look at it closely, Princess was only a browner, taller Javi with a slightly bigger chest. Kuya and Javi became best friends—I don’t know why, I mean, Javi was way out of Kuya’s league—no one saw it coming, not me, not Mama, and certainly not Papa. But what was weirder was having to witness Kuya bringing home Princess for a few weeks straight and then Javi the next because then they basically morphed into the same person: the same friend (or girlfriend) Kuya only gained out of pity. I mean, I myself had a crush on Javi (and wouldn’t mind being *his* girlfriend, but we do *not* need to go into that) but I can’t daydream about kissing Javi and then have his image morph into Princess while I’m *momol*-ing him in my head. I mean, we’re classmates, and I can’t momol my classmates.

Speaking of momol, I once saw Javi come into our house wearing lipstick. Yes, lipstick—it was faded, but I could clearly see the redness. I mean, I even think it was the shade that I had: the Sunnies Lip Dip in Girl Crush. I gave him wipes to clean his lips—he didn’t even need to ask because I was mature like that, no explanations needed. It was also my way of wiping away lipsticked-Javi from my memory—I mean, I can’t imagine momol-ing a guy wearing lipstick! But it was clear that he was momol-ing someone—not me, but someone with the same lipstick shade as me, so he’s practically momol-ing me for all intents and purposes.

He would go straight up to Kuya’s room where they work out. I’m sure it was Kuya’s idea to go private—of course, Kuya couldn’t be normal and go to a gym like normal people. He’s shy like that. Like the first time we ever watched him play basketball a few weeks back and Papa practically allowed him to drink until morning or take drugs and momol girls and that kind of stuff in the victory party, but Kuya being Kuya said no. Even Javi couldn’t get him to say yes. And that was already Javi.

Now if only I hadn’t switched rooms with JB—there were peepholes there to Kuya’s room. I should know because I made those holes myself a few years back, to catch Kuya doing something illegal like smoking and drinking and drugs and then

tell Mama. It was fun to play detective when you were younger, and it was even more fun to see Kuya get in trouble for once and not me. But if I caught him doing those things *now*, I wouldn't tell Mama, but I'd even pat him on the back and join him. I've grown mature like that.

I couldn't make peepholes from my current room—the connecting walls are covered by his closet. I should know because I tried. I can't ask JB and use his room because he'll catch me ogling Javi (not Kuya), and he'll snitch me out to Papa. He's a blabbermouth like that. And then I'll be the one busted *again*, this time for liking boys. Papa says I'm not yet allowed to like boys because I'm too young—which isn't fair since my best friend Carmen was allowed to have a boyfriend two months ago. And *she* was younger than me by a whole month. They did break up eventually, but it's the having that counts! I told Papa that if I couldn't like boys, then maybe I'll like girls instead, and I stormed off before he could reply—I mean, if the world wasn't fair to me, I can at least make it a little unfair to him too. The world was only fair to the Carmens and Javis. Not even to the Manolos. It was quite fair to Princess—another girl my age allowed to own a boy, though maybe not so fair since the boy she did get to own was Manolo.

When I'm older, I want a Javi, or even 60 percent Javi, 40 percent Manolo—I mean, I'm not picky after all, and I can settle for a person at most forty percent undesirable.

"Ate, what's momol?" came a voice at my door. It was JB. He keeps coming to me with questions he can easily Google, but he stopped Googling ever since I borrowed his Ipad and saw Bench underwear models in his history. I mean, it was perfectly normal at ten or eleven-ish (How old was JB?) to be Googling such things—which were nowhere near what I would have Googled at eleven if I had had my own private Ipad then. He got all red and flustered and embarrassed when I confronted him, and ever since then he's been punishing me with never-ending questions.

"It means *make-out*, *make-out lang*. Like kissing but for hours and with tongue," I say. I immediately shut the door on his face.

Why hadn't he known about this already, I mean, isn't that what friends talked about all the time, especially at his age? What *else* could he and his friends be talking about? Maybe JB didn't have friends—no, I'm sure he did because he was no Manolo.

These questions can't keep going on—soon, I might even have to explain *sex* to him, and I know I couldn't because I can't talk about *sex*, at least not *out loud* and with a *family member*. Friends were different. Like how I could talk about it with Carmen. Or even with Princess, if I really wanted to. I mean, they've probably had sex, haven't they? What else were their boyfriends for? You couldn't get married at fifteen nor

could you commit to a lifelong bond of companionship. So it's *sesel*. *Sex, sex lang*. When Carmen and Jerome broke up, she didn't cry. We didn't go through tubs of ice cream or dramatic haircuts. She resumed normal life. That's why it's *lang*.

She said that by the first month, she knew that the relationship wasn't for her. The boy wasn't for her, and she wasn't for the boy. She went on for another month with him only because if she broke it off too early, she would be seen as a short-term slut with Jerome her victim. But, at two months, it was long enough to not seem superficial but short enough to not leave any lasting impact.

Princess and Kuya have been going on for almost a month. I'm betting they'll break up by the end of the first month. Princess is bored—I can tell, but we don't need to go into *that*—and I don't blame her. She's not the type to care about public appearances, so breaking up at one month was an easy option. And Manolo surely wouldn't be seen as the victim here—the pity would be for Princess for having put up with him for so long.

I've learned that there are always three parties involved in a couple: the man, the woman, and the onlookers. Usually the onlookers' opinions outweigh those of the other two, I mean, only look at Carmen and Jerome or what might happen to Princess and Manolo or what happened to Mama and Papa.

### **PART 3: BUNSO**

When Princess broke up with Kuya, I thought he became a drug addict. His eyes were as black as a panda's, and his skin was pale. That's how drug addicts looked on TV. Skin as pale as the milk Mama still makes me drink but I don't want to drink milk anymore because I'm already a big boy.

Kuya Javi sometimes teased me about it. When he came over, he'd laugh at me if he saw me with a milk moustache.

I want big boy drinks like coffee or the Absolute locked in Papa's cabinet. The Absolute I normally drink is from a green and plastic bottle, but Papa's was blue and it was in a *glass* bottle and the *e* was faded out. That's how you know it's for grown-ups.

Mama says that if someone drinks Papa's Absolute, they act crazy and become dizzy. Just like if someone ate drugs. *That* Absolut(e) was for responsible grown-ups, but drugs were for no one, whether they were responsible or not

Papa works for the government and has a friend who's a real policeman with a real gun and everything. He catches the bad people who do drugs, Papa says proudly. Once you start drugs you can never stop, like me with chocolate cake, but chocolate cake doesn't make you go crazy and shoot people, *anak*. Drugs do. So I should do my

best as a big boy and never do drugs. And Papa's friend should do his best also to kill the drug addicts before they can kill us.

But Papa's friend *can't* kill Kuya. Kuya might be a drug addict, but he doesn't want to kill people. He's just sad because Princess left him. "Sad people aren't dangerous—they just need help!" That's what I'll tell Papa's friend if he ever tries to shoot Kuya. I'm sure he'll understand and let him live.

Kuya replaced Princess with Kuya Javi. They played basketball together in school. Princess and Kuya never played basketball together in school because Princess is a girl and Kuya is a boy; and, Princess was in *her* own school with Ate where they were all *girls*; and Kuya was in *my* school with me and Kuya Javi where we were all *boys*. I can see why Kuya would play more with Kuya Javi than with Princess. Ate's school was far away from our school, and by the time he reached there it will already be nighttime and the gym would be closed.

Sometimes, they would play here at home, even though we only have a half-court while in school there was a full one, where they played one-on-one. One day, Kuya Javi was able to make Kuya good enough to be out of reserb and into Varsity A. I was so proud of Kuya. He deserved it.

When Kuya told us the news, he looked so happy—because he forgot all about Princess. And because he forgot all about Princess and was happy, he didn't need to do drugs anymore. His eyes had returned to normal. And because he didn't do drugs anymore, now Papa's friend wouldn't need to try to kill him.

Kuya Javi visited our house often after that, and the two of them would hide in Kuya's room if they weren't playing one-on-one outside. Kuya was shy like that. Sometimes when they *did* leave the room, Javi would eat dinner with us. In those times, Ate would not say a word. That's funny because Ate is *not* the shy one—when Princess ate with us, Ate would talk nonstop.

Mama said it's because Ate is a girl, and Princess is a girl too. And girls work better with girls but boys work better with boys. That's why basketball had boys' teams and girls' teams. They never mixed because they wouldn't work well together, and the game wouldn't be fun.

But why can't *teams* of girls go against *teams* of boys and boys go against girls? Papa said it's because girls are shorter and softer, and then Mama said it wouldn't be fair to the cute girl angels to go against the brutish boy demons.

I promised Mama I'll never be a brutish boy demon because demons were bad, but I wasn't sure what "brutish" was (Mama sometimes used big words because she's a doctor) Wasn't Harry Potter brutish? No, Mama said, but Javi is. I knew Kuya Javi was short but now he's also brutish. We'd seen Kuya Javi play often, and Kuya play

sometimes (which was better than no times), and he could bring the ball from one side to the next so fast that most players would be scared to get in his way (this was Kuya Javi being brutish, not Kuya).

“What about Kuya, is he brutish?”

Mama said Kuya wasn’t, that Kuya was a team player, someone who’d pass the ball instead of shoot for himself. Papa said Kuya was too soft like that and told Kuya to be more like Kuya Javi.

“If Kuya is that soft, maybe he should play with the girls instead—in Princess’s team—so it would be fair.”

Kuya liked that even less than being in reserb.

Over the weeks, Kuya was becoming less soft. Before, I could play drums on his stomach and it would make a loud hollow sound with every bang. Like bongos. Now it made a dull sound. Like slapping a concrete wall. He wouldn’t let me play with his tummy anymore.

He was training with Kuya Javi. I see them in Kuya’s room through two holes on the wall, and I would follow them as much as I could—all the sit-ups, and push-ups. I couldn’t do the pull-ups because I had no metal bar installed in my room. I also couldn’t do the wrestling because I had no one to wrestle with. Once, I tried asking them if I could join.

“Maybe when you’re older,” said Kuya Javi. Working out was another one of those grown-up things. I’ll be old someday and then I’ll work out, drink Absolute (the blue one, with the faded *e*), and momol all day any time.

Is that what grown-ups do? But Ate was somewhat grown-up and didn’t do any of those things. Mama was clearly grown-up and didn’t do those things either. Maybe it was only reserved for grown-up demon brutish boys. And what Kuya was doing was getting demon brutish lessons from Javi. He needed Javi to make him go from soft to hard. And soon, Kuya will be fully-grown, and he’ll be the one teaching me. But if Kuya was busy, I could get lessons from Javi instead. The two of us could do pull-ups in *my* room this time (I’ll ask him to buy me a metal bar like the one Kuya has—he’d know how to install it with a drill and screws and everything) or we could wrestle on the floor and do all the moves he and Kuya were doing now: chokes, armbars, kimuras, hand chugs, bridges, blow shoves (I sometimes heard these words much easier than I could see through the hole), and the one where Kuya’s head was pinned between Kuya Javi’s thighs until Kuya tapped out because he couldn’t breathe.

And then I could ask Kuya Javi anything I wanted to know, like why I still pee my pants in the middle of the night while I sleep and why was the pee white (which I can’t ask Ate because she was not a boy and I also can’t ask Google because then



Ate will find out). Kuya Javi can be both Kuya and Ate. Soon, I'll be grown-up and no longer soft. Maybe Papa will be proud. I'll play basketball and be brutish but not a demon since I promised Mama. Can you be a man and not a demon? I'll have to ask Kuya Javi.

#### **PART 4: KUYA**

We lost today's game, none of us felt like drinking, and I came home to find Princess sneaking up the stairs. I can guess why she was here, but I didn't care. She didn't mind me, and I didn't mind her. Maybe she came here to see Isabel, maybe they've gotten closer since we've grown apart. Maybe Isabel was quick to gather up what I was foolish enough to drop. Like your opponent seeing you drop the ball as you were supposed to shoot and took the point for themselves. Well maybe your hands were tired or sweaty. Or maybe you were operating on no sleep because you were up all night studying to get your test scores up.

Whatever it was, it wasn't my fault. But even if it was, I wasn't to blame. Javi should have trained me more. All I did was do what Javi told me to do, and if what Javi told me to do wasn't enough, that was on Javi and not on me.

If I was Javi's bitch I should've at least gained something from it. Otherwise I was just his bitch.

That was what they called me. He only got in the team because he's Javi's bitch, they say whispering behind my back. What they didn't know is that ears don't only look front—that ears cover for the eyes where eyes can't see.

Papa, Mama, Isabel, and JB all came to the game, the four of them together as they normally do. I came early for warm-ups; they said sure, they'll follow after and meet me in the gym before the gym starts. That's also how they left, all four of them together; I said it's fine I'll meet them at home before dinner. I had asked to be left behind. They didn't leave me behind on purpose. Only Mama put up a fight and said, "Come home with us *na*—I'll *pa*-deliver your favorite—" But I still asked to be left behind. It felt nice, though, that Mama tried to get me to go home with them. Papa couldn't care less. Not anymore.

College entrance test results were out. I passed two. You'd think two was good enough, that the two outweighed the four, like the way the good outweighed the bad. Apparently not, if the two were CSB and UP Baguio with "waitlist" marked in bold, red, capitalized letters and the other four were Universities that *did* lead to UP Law or Ateneo Law or San Beda Law or Wherever Papa Wanted To Go But Couldn't Law. Papa's family was poor back in the day, he said. His mother and father were *sari-sari* store owners, and in debt, so they couldn't afford quality schooling. That was his

excuse, what was mine? Here is the money, he said, your tuition is right here—and all you had to do was get in, and you couldn't even do that.

I didn't have excuses, I had reasons, he said. Like how I whined that I didn't have enough time to study because I had to train for the game. Another day I'd cry that I didn't have enough time to train because I had to study. No, *anak*, it's because you don't have any sense—no sense of time, money, or responsibility.

I had no one to blame but myself. Will I blame my mother, Doctor Summa Cum Laude PhD turned Housewife by choice? Or will you blame me, *anak*?

"Do you think it's my fault, Manolo?" said Princess behind the bleachers. The two of us were alone and inadvertently prevented Javi and a girl named Carmen from having after-training sex (he told me afterward and he wasn't happy). Javi didn't even need to win a game to celebrate. His life was already always winning.

"We don't click, Manolo, and that's fine at first but you didn't even try to make it work," was the last thing Princess said before she left.

But all I ever do is try. If it doesn't succeed, then it remains a "try."

I looked out the window. Javi was there on the court. He was teaching Isabel—guiding her from behind, holding her shooting arm with his right hand and gripping her waist with his left. Like he did with me in the first few days of our training, but only when we were alone at home. Isabel tried shooting on her own but missed. Javi laughed, hugged her for a while, then got the ball that ricocheted into some plants. I could tell this Javi wasn't Javi. This Javi had longer hair which barely reached the shoulders. This Javi laughed at himself too when he missed his own shot. This Javi was soft.

This Manolo couldn't even pass the ball properly.

My bed was softer than usual when I lay down on it. Sweat was where tears should be. I didn't deserve soft pillows, and I deserved to sleep on rocks. That's how men were built: between a rock and a hard place.

That's how I was built, Manolo. But you were too pampered, he said, too spoiled by Maribel. Not spoiled by my mother, but by Maribel. Because I couldn't blame my mother, but maybe some of the blame can be apportioned to Maribel. None to Emmanuel. But if it was my fault, it was on you, *anak*, not you, Manolo.

## **PART 5: MAMA**

My little boy is turning into a man today.

Just last week, we got his report card, and there was a poster on the blackboard that said JB was third place overall in class. His adviser, Mrs. Pamatpat, said that JB would've been first place if he studied just a bit more: "Not *naman* saying *po* that he

doesn't study enough, but not *rin* naman saying that he couldn't study more."

I talked to JB about this in the car, and he said he was happy to be third place. Only third? I asked him if he wanted to go for first place next time.

"But that would mean not having time to watch Kuya's games. And I need time for *my* games too. Mama, I want to start playing basketball. 'Yung *totoo*. Not just shooting by myself in the court at home. There's going to be a Milo Basketball Clinic in the summer, and Miguel and Jericho are going. Can I go there instead of Kumon? Please?"

I immediately said yes.

Today we were in St. Luke's. My son was lying on a surgical bed, ready to be circumcised by my once colleague Dr. Romulo Cortez.

"How are the kids, Rom?" I asked. I hadn't seen him in years, and the only thing I now know about him is that he has kids. Which was also the only thing he remembered about me.

The last of his four was now finishing college, so his wife and his wallet can relax a bit, he said. Mrs. Cortez used to be a surgeon as well, but four kids came one after the other, and she had to choose. She didn't *need* to work—her husband reminded her. But then what about all those years of medical school wasted? It wasn't a waste, my dear, since it brought her to me as a fresh-graduate resident in my clinic—think about it. Otherwise, we wouldn't have met—and she loves me. And I love her. Rom has always been a romantic.

Evangeline Cortez now stays at home all day despite not having any more dependent children to cater to (three of them had jobs and their own families, and the fourth had his own apartment and a sizable allowance)—the house was practically empty. She only stayed on out of habit and because she couldn't just suddenly stand up and go back to being a surgeon—some skills are forgotten after decades of disuse.

"This is the last one, *noh?*"

Yes. JB was the youngest. And soon, Maribel Mendoza might become an Evangeline Cortez.

Emmanuel was beside me, returning from buying snacks: some last-minute food for JB and a way to pass the time for us waiting. Isabel and Manolo were left at home.

JB was terrified and excited. It was not easy transitioning from boy to man—those few centimeters of skin make all the difference—because suddenly, your voice deepens, hair appears everywhere, and muscles bulk up. That's what my husband keeps telling JB—Emmanuel talked on and on about it from home, the car ride, until here in the hospital, telling him how proud he is that his son was going to become a man. My ex-boyfriend, the one I dated before I met Emmanuel, was uncut.

Circumcision wasn't as popular in other Western countries but still here was a man with a low voice, hair all over his body, and bulked-up muscles. He returned to the States after spending a few years of university in the Philippines because it was cheaper to study English Literature and Art here. He asked me to go home with him. My answer is obvious. By Emmanuel's standards, he was not a man.

My phone's alarm went off reminding me to call Aling Pacita, our cleaner-cook. She wasn't a maid—she was contractual, so we didn't have any problems with that new Kasambahay Law. Not to say we don't pay her enough because we do. I mean, she never asked for a raise.

She had taken a week off to return to her family in Iloilo—someone was either born or is dying.

I wouldn't be surprised if Emmanuel and the children didn't even know Pacita was gone. They'd believe me if I told them that Pacita would be cooking Chickenjoy from scratch and that Mama just wanted to do the dishes and sent Pacita home for the day. Pacita or Mama, it was all the same to them as long as they had food, clean cutlery, and fresh-smelling laundry. All they're really good for is carrying in the groceries from the car—as long as the groceries are *in* the house, everything else is fine.

I went outside to make the call. Pacita said that her flight was delayed because of the typhoon and that she would be stuck in Iloilo until the winds subsided.

I was furious—I warned her about the typhoon weeks ago, that the news said a typhoon was coming and that it might cause problems with travel, and I told her that making this trip was not a good idea at the moment, but still she decided to push through with the visit. She was hard-headed like that sometimes. Her one week leave would have to be extended by one or two days max depending on the weather. I hung up the phone; I didn't want to hear any more grovelling excuses and apologies. Neither of those can bring her home or cook food or clean the dishes or do the laundry.

JB started crying and calling for me, and I ran back to his side.

"Mama, will it hurt?" he sobbed through mouthfuls of French fries.

"Mama wouldn't know, anak—she's a *girl*," said Emmanuel, laughing.

I'm only a doctor, I wanted to say, but like Evangeline Cortez, I guess I wasn't anymore.

"When it's done, it will look like a swollen pink mushroom, anak. And *then* you'll be a man."

"Like you and Kuya?"

Emmanuel didn't reply though he still smiled and merely stroked JB's hair.

JB began giggling to himself, “A mushroom? Can you eat it?” He giggled some more.

“So *that* was what Kuya was doing? Eating Kuya Javi’s *mushroom*? That’s funny ...”

Rom came back to announce that everything was ready for JB. For the moment, all else was forgotten, and everything was focused on JB. Did it hurt too much? No it didn’t, I’m a big boy now, Mama. Can he walk? Yes, big boys can walk even if they’re hurt, but I wasn’t hurt that much, Mama. Emmanuel helped JB into one of my old skirts and assisted him to the car. I don’t want to wear a skirt, Papa, I’m not a girl!—but it’s OK, anak, I wore a skirt too when it was my time. A true man while wearing a skirt is still a true man.

The rest of the drive home was silent after that. We went inside and caught Princess going into Isabel’s room. None of us minded her, and she didn’t mind us. We continued to JB’s room and had him settled to sleep on his bed. Emmanuel quietly closed the door as we left so as not to wake him up.

He went to Manolo’s room, opening it as calmly as he closed JB’s door, then locked it behind him. JB slept undisturbed until dinnertime. When he came down the stairs, I had finished fixing up dinner, out of the takeaway boxes and arranged neatly on the serving plates. Was Princess staying for dinner? No, Mama, she left while you were cooking. By the way, Mama, if JB is joining the Milo Basketball Clinic, can I also join—I mean, I won’t be alone there since I’d be going with Princess, so it would be completely safe for me to join. I told Isabel I’d think about it first.

Pacita returned the next morning—thank God because I didn’t have energy left in me to do anymore work. We had breakfast, cooked by Pacita, then I made Pacita bring up a breakfast tray for JB, then I had Pacita clear the table after we were done eating. Pacita called me from the kitchen while washing the dishes and plates and the big *kawali* with burnt fried rice stuck on the bottom, and then she gave me *pasalubong*, some dried mangoes from Iloilo. At this, I thought that maybe she wasn’t selfish after all. I thanked her, and Pacita said she hoped I didn’t have such a hard time when she was gone. I only smiled to answer and then looked into the cupboards to see what was needed to be bought from the grocery for the week. Pacita, do we need to buy detergent? Yes po, ma’am, *pati* po fabric softener.

I left the kitchen to go to the bathroom to check if there was still enough hand soap and face wash and toilet paper and shampoo. Underneath the sink, I opened the cabinet wherein I kept some medical supplies in case of emergencies. I took stock of those as well, and I saw we were running low on Betadine and bandages, though the

glass container of cotton balls was still half-filled. I took what was left—they would have to make do—and brought them with me to Manolo’s room.

I walked with the morbid sense of excitement feeling like a real doctor again, on her way to see a patient (with a true sense of purpose that would make Evangeline Cortez jealous). First general assessment—multiple lesions scattered across the body: all over the face, the arms, the legs; multiple incipient hematomas on the forehead and the occipital region; and slight dental misalignment with no dislodged teeth. Treatment will take longer than previous procedures on average, but I’m sure I’ll still have enough time to go to the grocery store afterwards and be back home by lunchtime.