

# The Long Way Home

**Carmel Ilustrisimo**

## I.

The skin patch stuck securely to the back of her neck, and Madelyn Chua was sure that nobody would notice it this time. Once upon a time, when she was younger and more naive, it didn't matter. She stuck out like a sore thumb during her first audition and was told to exit the room before the music even started. She remembered crying at home after that, and her father saying, "What do you expect? *Acceptance?* From the Naturals?" He laughed, though in his eyes was sadness.

It was a painful realization for her. That being top of her class in her eleven years of training at the Santa Rosa Ballet School meant nothing if you didn't fulfill the basic requirement—to be a Natural. Either you were born one or you weren't. In general, the Naturals of Laguna were more tolerant of first- and second-generation Synthetics, but Madelyn didn't want to be the star of a small, random local studio that she was being groomed to be. No, from the moment she was born, she was restless, determined to reach for the stars and unseat them. She wanted to be a prima in any of the biggest dance companies in Neo Manila, and nothing would stop her.

Not even being a second-generation Synthetic.

She called up her brother first thing after the audition. Nelson, who was three years older than her, was having a hard time as well. He had recently been hired as

a parts salesperson for an up-and-coming auto company, but that was not what he wanted. None of the publishing houses, news companies, and advertising agencies wanted to hire a second-generation Synthetic either. “Your writing lacks soul,” they would tell him. Or, “your choice of words and impeccable grammar seem too mechanical.” But they would only say this after checking up his background.

“Madelyn, how was it?” Nelson asked.

Madelyn giggled. “They didn’t know. I used a skin patch.”

“It didn’t fall off?”

“I only put it in before the audition. I found a good glue online. It was great. They liked me. I think.”

“I’m sure they did. Tell me how it goes.”

“No problem. They’ll call me back within the week. I hope they don’t notice the patch in the footage.”

Madelyn emerged from the building and into the elevated walkway that connected it to other buildings in the heart of Neo Manila. Layers and layers of lives and livelihoods sat on top of each other, sleek hard glass-covered structures reaching up to two hundred stories high, connected by intricate matrices of walkways and elevators. They never got city planning right, and yet, this was where everything happened. Not everybody became famous, but all those who did started here.

Madelyn took a deep breath and savored her surroundings. The streets clamored with the whirr of electric buses and taxis, while in the sky, solar-powered planes and sky cars pierced the clouds in straight, neat lines, without going near each other. Madelyn glanced up and wondered if she would ever ride one of those. One day, maybe. She could already imagine it—the golden lights, the applause, the glow of holograms. Then she caught herself, chuckled, and walked on.

The sun was just about to set and the city lights were turning on, bit by bit. She loved this part of the day. Perhaps her parents wouldn’t mind if she ate first before catching the bus home.

Madelyn took the nearest sky elevator to a popular, yet affordable commercial building near the bus station. It was a place teeming with Synthetics, first gens and second gens and even the rare third gens in diapers. The Synthetic workers cooked and served food, kept the stalls clean, called out wares, restocked supplies. Many of the Naturals who came upon the building did so only to avoid the heat of the sun or the smoke outside in order to get to the bus stop. It was a place for Synthetics first and foremost. It was shabby and exciting enough for that. *Save the boring wide cleanliness for the Naturals*, as her mother often said. Madelyn did not believe it. *One day*, she told herself, one day, she wouldn’t have to wear a patch.

Madelyn's favorite place was a noodle stop on the 99th floor, which was a bit more expensive than most other options because it overlooked the city. There were wide windows that stretched from one end of the restaurant to another, and if you were lucky or early enough, you could pick a stool at the long table directly facing them. Madelyn ordered her favorite spicy noodles and sat beside a young family of Synthetics: two parents who bore the manufacturing logo of a first-generation company on the back of their necks, and their young children, a boy of around five and a girl of around three. Second gens. Like Nelson and Madelyn. They all smiled at her, wordlessly telling her it was okay to occupy the last remaining seat at the best table.

Near the counter was a screen showing the news. Despite the sun rapidly setting in front of her, Madelyn was drawn to the screen. Everybody was. There were more updates on the Katherine Hilario case, which the Naturals tried their best to cover up but only succeeded in making more viral and sensational.

The noodle stop was still fraught with a silent rage and tension when Madelyn paid for her food and left. She sighed to herself and walked with her eyes downcast to the bus station. They still had a long way to go. Years and years ago, before Synthetics' cells learned to reproduce like Naturals', resulting in the birth of a new generation which included Nelson and Madelyn, the first Synthetics were not even given names and places to live. They literally could not own anything without the permission of a Natural. Nowadays, in big cities, Naturals and Synthetics still ate separately and took separate buses and danced in separate theaters, despite laws against segregation, but something told Madelyn that this too would change. And she wanted to be part of that change.

The walk to the station did not take long. Madelyn climbed up a bus passing by Santa Rosa and settled for a seat on the right side, on the second row, right beside the window. The lights blurred past, a dizzying but exhilarating mixture of neon edges and soft glows. *One day*, Madelyn thought, *you will be mine*.

It was only after that, when the old woman behind her tapped her on the shoulder, that she realize that there was a problem. "You dropped something," the old woman said, pointing to the ground. On the aisle between Madelyn's seat and the one to her left was her small square skin patch.

## II.

All eyes were on her. She knew it. The sensors in the back of her head informed her. She could see everyone from the old lady directly behind her, to the very back of the bus. She could feel their eyes on her skin, as heat surged from multiple spots under

the sensors. Sweat trickled down her arms and legs, and her hands shook before she even noticed them.

*Music*, she immediately thought, opening her bag and sifting through its contents for her handheld. It was much easier, she would think in hindsight, to pull down her sleeve and activate her screen implant. They all knew that she was a Synthetic by that point, anyway. But no—out came bobby pins, and hair nets, and rubber bands, as well as elastics and an extra leotard and two new pairs of pointe shoes. *Where is it?* Madelyn thought angrily. Then, groaning, she pulled down her right sleeve and turned off the sensors at the back of her head.

A second of dizziness, and she no longer saw them. Yet her memory had stored one last image of every single passenger on the bus. The old woman directly behind her. A man in an office suit two seats behind the old woman, appearing to be in his late thirties or early forties. Across him, a middle-aged mother and two little boys. Behind them, a boy around her age, in his early twenties, watching something from his handheld. Then four giggling teenagers at the very back, dressed in identical private school uniforms. Madelyn found her handheld at last, tucked in one of the side-pockets of her bag, along with a pair of earphones. She turned up the volume of Tchaikovsky's "Danse Russe" from the third act of the *Swan Lake* ballet to drown their words, although she managed to catch "Why does it smell like burned plastic?" from a female voice somewhere in the back.

The next stop was twenty minutes away. The plan was to get down and board another bus. She would double-check it this time, and take note of the tell-tale signs that showed that it was not a hostile ride. Synthetic-friendly buses were smaller and simpler, with unadorned hard seats, charging ports, and darker window shields. Madelyn was lucky; unlike many second-gens, she had outgrown her orange light allergy before grade school. Nelson was less fortunate. He started breaking out in hives while watching a town talent competition where Madelyn danced once, and their parents had to rush him out of the theatre.

Madelyn remembered this as they drove through the long highway, which was lit up by yellowish-orange illumination orbs every few meters or so. *Nelson would not like this*, she thought. She would never forget that incident. She was probably eight years old then, and already a veteran in talent shows. Two numbers before her, a boy performed a declamation piece about sunrises. The tech crew somehow forgot that there were Synthetics in the audience and used orange light to simulate sunlight. Several children started to malfunction. Thankfully, someone alerted the crew and they turned off the light before the situation aggravated. Nevertheless, when the town memo came out at the end of the week, many posted angry comments on the

write-up of the incident. Some even demanded a formal apology from the theatre, which promptly followed.

They reached the stop. Even though the sensors on the back of her head were turned off, she knew what everybody was thinking and silently begging her to do: *Please go down*. Madelyn fixed her things and peered outside. The bus stop had one long bench and holograms of advertisements behind it. Models quivered in the neon glow, products turned around in slow circles, words flashed underneath and above them in multiple bright colors. And then, out of nowhere, static. Gray grains and jagged lines, followed by a bright flash. Then bold, black words under the still picture of a little girl.

### **JUSTICE FOR KATHERINE HILARIO (2075–2085)**

Everybody waited. Someone groaned. Another tapped the glass window with their finger. Someone else began to tap their foot. The bus driver actually turned around and looked directly at Madelyn, and only Madelyn.

“I’m staying,” she replied firmly, before the question was even asked.

### III.

She had just declared an open war, in the bus, with her as the only member of her army.

And she learned, almost immediately, who the general was in theirs.

The man in the office suit coughed loudly and raised his hand. Everybody turned to him, including Madelyn. “It’s a bit cold in here,” he complained. “Driver, will you please adjust the temp?”

“No problem.” The driver pressed something on his screen, and hot air began to come out in gusts from the right-side ceiling vents, directly above Madelyn. A prick of heat stung her from her chest, an alert from her system warning her to remove herself from the situation before she would malfunction. At the back, the teenagers snickered. The old lady’s sly smile reflected on the window. Madelyn then realized that her skin patch was still on the ground, between her seat and the one across hers, and so she picked it up and moved to the other side of the same row, directly behind the bus driver, where the air remained cool. Even if he adjusted the temperature of the left-side vent, Madelyn was still sitting right across the driver’s own air conditioner vent, which she knew he would not adjust. *Checkmate*, she thought, and smiled to herself.

The bus moved on. Madelyn leaned back and scrolled through her handheld for another song to play and distract herself with. Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, Act 1. Little Marie's solo with the nutcracker doll. She had danced it before, as a first-year student at the Santa Rosa Ballet School. She was, even then, the star of her dance class, always front and center and eventually handpicked for the lead child role, Little Marie, in their staging of the *Nutcracker*.

Madelyn tried to focus on this happy memory. She was ten years old. She had just received her first pair of pointe shoes and was learning how to dance on the tip of her toes. For this performance, though, she was deemed too young for complex pointe moves and had to dance demi-pointe in flat ballet slippers. It didn't matter. She was the lead of the first act, and all eyes were on her. She remembered her frilly white dress and pink ballet slippers; she remembered holding the hands of older ballet students as she twirled and leaped onstage. At the end of the first act, she received a warm round of applause. She loved every moment of it, being onstage, under the lights, dancing as if she were on top of the world, and after that, hearing everybody clap.

After the show, she ran to her proud parents and Nelson in the audience and said simply, "This is what I want to do for the rest of my life."

Her teacher, Mrs. Salvador, agreed. During their next dance lesson, she praised Madelyn's performance and added, "You were born to dance." Then she went on a tirade about Madelyn's sickled feet and misplaced elbows. But this was Mrs. Salvador at her kindest. She had no qualms about making her students cry. And it worked, Madelyn thought. The results were evident. Despite their large Synthetic population, Santa Rosa Ballet School held its own, and even stood out, in countless dance competitions against other state-sponsored dance schools in the country.

Madelyn thought about this with a tinge of sadness in her heart. Her last meeting with her dance teacher wasn't a happy one. She was, after all, trained to dance for the Laguna Ballet Theatre. After the graduation performance, she immediately got an offer from them, which she turned down on the spot. Even though Madelyn had tried to explain her dream as politely as possible to her teacher multiple times, before and after graduating, saying that she didn't want to be stuck in Laguna forever, her teacher seemed offended, and even worse, disappointed. "There's no way I can stop you, Madelyn," she sighed the last time they talked, during Madelyn's final day as a guest teacher in the summer program. "All I can say is, you're welcome back anytime." Then she hugged her favorite student, leaving her guilt-stricken for a week. Yet her mind didn't change.

Now here she was.

Her music stopped. There was a beep on her handheld, a notification from the News. *Katherine Hilario's Foster Siblings to Testify Again Tomorrow*, read the article title.

Everybody appeared to have received the same notification. The bus driver ignored it; he was on duty. Madelyn discreetly watched the reflections of the other passengers on the windows. The old woman frowned and locked her handheld without reading any further. The office man gave out an annoyed groan, swiped off the notification, and read another news article. Madelyn turned on her back sensors. The children had their notifications turned off and were glued to a fantasy game. Their mother was reading the article and shaking her head. It was at times like this when Madelyn wished that Synthetics really had the ability to read minds, as they were accused of having. The boy her age kept bobbing his head to his music, although the article was opened in one tab. The four teenagers had also ignored the notification entirely and were sending messages to each other. Madelyn turned up her vision level and could faintly see through the seats and bags, though she felt dizzy from her depleting energy. One text read, "Ugh, this means more rallies and traffic."

Madelyn turned off her sensors.

Someone coughed again, and Madelyn was sure, having heard him cough before, that it was the man in the office suit, ready to strike.

#### IV.

He didn't strike right away.

For ten minutes, Madelyn reread articles about the case of the little girl, Katherine Hilario.

Nobody knew who her parents were. Nobody had to. Legally, they had neither claims nor rights to raise the child since they surrendered her to the care of the state when she was an infant. And so the state raised her, for nine years, in an institution for Natural, Synthetic, and mixed orphans, until that fateful meeting with her would-be foster parents, Annabelle and Donald Vinoya. The Vinoyas had two biological children of their own, both slightly younger than their foster sister. And that was how Katherine spent the last year of her short life, with them.

Static. Madelyn's heart thumped out of nowhere, and her mind was abuzz. She pressed her hands to her temples and closed her eyes. The pain was still there, and yet, amidst the buzz of static and the whirling of her head, she could hear what was triggering it: music. Synthephobe "music," playing loudly from the handheld of someone in the back. Naturals had told her that such music was exhilarating,

exciting, and even catchy to them, and could not understand Madelyn when she tried explaining that it sounded like thunder to Synthetics like her—furious and disturbing and frightening. “Oops,” said the man in the office suit in a sarcastic tone. “Sorry about that.” Madelyn resisted the urge to glare at him. She turned off her sensors as subtly as possible. Behind her, she could hear snickers from the teenagers.

They passed under another tunnel. Then they reached the sky bridge, which, on either side, showed the colorful, brightly-lit domes and borderlines of the agricultural planes. “Mommy, Mommy,” said one of the little boys. “I want to sit in front!”

“Not too loud, Ricky. You’re disturbing everyone.”

“But the lights! I want to see the lights!” The child was practically screeching. He stood up and scampered down the aisle and was knocked off-balance by the motion of the bus.

As Madelyn turned around to look, a loud, whiny wail cut through the whirl of the rushing engine.

The mother was quick to the rescue. The other child, who appeared to be slightly older, waited at the seat. “Ryan, be a big boy and stay there. Ricky and I will return.” She kissed the bump on the younger child’s knee, lifted him, and trudged to the front, leaning over the arm rests of the left row seats for support.

When she reached Madelyn, they were quickly approaching the end of the brightly-lit fields. “There’s an empty seat behind you,” she told Madelyn, her eyes cold and commanding.

Madelyn gave her bag a tighter clutch. If the woman had been polite, she would have almost considered standing up for her and her little brat. Almost. The little brat was biting his lip and giving her a big puppy doll look that did *not* look cute. If Madelyn or Nelson had tried that with their parents, at five or six, after being told numerous times not to stand in a moving bus, they would’ve been in big trouble.

“What are you waiting for?” The woman leaned against Madelyn’s backrest and clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Are you malfunctioning again? There’s a seat behind you, and you can move there. That’s not hard to understand.”

“I understand,” Madelyn said. “I understand exactly what you’re trying to do.”

“Mommy, the lights! They’re almost gone!” The little boy started to cry again.

Madelyn stayed put. The boy had to be taught a lesson. His mother too, more importantly. “You can sit behind me,” she replied sweetly. “As you said, no one’s there.”

“But she has a bigger window, Mommy!” the boy wailed. He would not even address Madelyn.

*Children*, she realized, *pick up things like this so easily, without adults even noticing what they're imparting to them*. She wondered what it must've been like for little Katherine Hilario, stuck under the same roof with the Vinoya couple and their two children—all Naturals. The tragic details of Katherine's case resurfaced in Madelyn's mind, and she actually glared at the mother.

"You said it yourself. There are other unoccupied seats to choose from. You are free to choose."

The woman's face turned a bright, angry red and as she searched for a scathing thing to say, the little boy kicked Madelyn's bare leg.

It didn't hurt. It was a child's kick. And all Madelyn did to retaliate was look the boy in the eye and give him the same kind of warning look her parents had given her as a child, when she misbehaved. Even up to now, sometimes. But she was a Synthetic and to defy a Natural was still considered misbehavior.

"Don't look at my son that way," the woman said between gritted teeth. Without another word, she turned around and began trudging back to her original seat with her brat.

On her way, the man in the office suit stopped her and whispered something to her. The mother whispered something back. The eyes of both drifted toward Madelyn, and they nodded before the woman and her son sat again.

Madelyn was dimly aware of all this happening behind her. She was busy watching something from her handheld. The third day of the court proceedings in the Katherine Hilario case exposed bombshell after bombshell—mainly because it was the first time Katherine's sisters took the stand.

Elle Vinoya was two years younger than her foster sister and two years older than her own biological sister, Yvette. Elle was now ten years old, the age Katherine was when she died. It was unnerving to see such a young child, with big eyes and braided hair and small hands folded primly on her plaid skirt, talking about the horrors she witnessed and was unable to stop.

"Did you ever see your parents hit Katherine?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many times?"

"Every day."

"Every day?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did they hit her with their hands or with objects?"

"Both, sir. But Mama used her hands more."

"What else did they hit her with?"

"Mostly the belt or the curtain rod. Sometimes they would throw things at her."

"Where did they hit your sister? Which parts of her body?"

"Her face, her back ... everywhere."

Madelyn hit pause. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It was not the first time she'd heard about the grisly details of Katherine's death, but to hear it from the viewpoint of another child? It was overwhelming.

But the injustice of it all compelled her to keep fighting.

She hit play.

"What did Katherine do when she was hit?"

"She would cry and beg them to stop."

"Did they stop when she told them to?"

"No, sir."

"Now, Elle, will you tell us next where Katherine slept at night?"

"Well, at first she slept in the same room with me and Yvette."

"Did she have a bed of her own?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did your sister ever sleep in the storage room under the stairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did she have her own bed there?"

"No, sir. It was too small for a bed."

"How did Katherine sleep there?"

"On the floor, curled up, beside the shoe rack."

"When did she start sleeping there?"

"When Mama and Papa found out that she was a Synthetic."

## V.

Nothing happened for a while, but Madelyn did not allow herself to believe for a second that she'd won the battle.

The map on the screen showed that they were only fifteen minutes to Santa Rosa Station, where Madelyn would get off and head home and hopefully forget about the ride for the rest of her life. But she knew that this was not possible. Synthetics were not allowed to reprogram their memories, even if they could. The goal was to live as "Natural" a life as possible. That was what her parents' generation fought for, when they demanded for names, properties, and freedom. That was what they had long struggled to prove. That they were capable of living and dying and feeling and suffering like other human beings. That they considered themselves human beings, not "products," despite the way they were created.

No, Madelyn had to carry this for the rest of her life. One day, the Vinoya couple would be convicted, Madelyn would dance in a large Neo Manila theater, and there would be no such thing as “mixed” or “Naturals only” buses. But even then, the journey to get there must be remembered. Every murdered Synthetic child, every ignored Synthetic dancer, every ostracized Synthetic passenger’s story needed to be preserved in order for such mistakes to not happen again. Even if it rendered their triumph bittersweet. Even if the memories were painful. Because they always would be.

In a way, she would never get off this bus.

There was a tap on her shoulder.

Looming over her was the figure of the man in the business suit. “Get out of this bus,” he ordered. “You’re causing nothing but trouble.”

Madelyn tried not to be intimidated by the disgust, the ferocity, and the unabated hatred in his eyes, but it was difficult. She flinched but managed to finish her sentence: “I don’t care what you think.”

“There are signal jams in my handheld,” continued the man, as if he hadn’t heard her.

“What does that have to do with me?” Madelyn clenched her fist. She wished her voice hadn’t trembled.

“You’re not supposed to be here, and you know that.”

Madelyn looked around and tried to find a sympathetic face. None. The four teenagers were either asleep or listening to music, unaware or pretending to be unaware of what was happening. The mother was smirking. Her two sons watched them, with more curiosity than anything else. The boy who was around her age was still preoccupied with his handheld.

The man turned to the bus driver. “Driver,” he ordered, “stop the bus and take this girl out. She’s jamming handheld signals and I need to call my sick mom.”

Madelyn clutched the armrest of her seat. “Wait, wait, wait!” she protested. “You can’t just kick someone out of a bus in the middle of the night!”

“You can’t just enter buses,” he said, “without considering how much you’ll imperil and inconvenience your fellow passengers. That’s just selfish!”

Madelyn was so stunned by his choice of words that she was speechless for a moment. Again, she tried looking around for a sympathetic face, but she found none.

The man gripped her arm. “Get off the bus!”

Madelyn socked him on the mouth with her other fist. “Get your hands off me!”

“Hey!” said the bus driver. “Stop that!” He put the engine on self-driving mode and marched to where the two were fighting. Then he pulled Madelyn off the man.

“You—” he pointed a finger at her. “I understand that you made a mistake, getting into the wrong bus and all that, and it’s not your fault. But you need to stop causing trouble.” He looked at the man. “Be patient and wait till we get to the next stop. She’s young; I’m sure she didn’t mean to cause the jams.”

Madelyn sat and glared at the man. He glared back at her as he returned to his seat. The driver, too, returned to his post. He didn’t complain. The bus did most of the driving anyway—he was there just in case something happened to the system. It was a law. In other words, such rare fights made his job interesting.

Madelyn looked at the tiredness in the driver’s face and knew that he did not mean any harm. And yet, blinking back tears, she felt frustrated and infuriated. No one had jumped into her rescue. Not that she was a damsel in distress; she was angrier at the fact that nobody—nobody else but the driver—found anything wrong with harassing a harmless Synthetic on a bus. Or at least, they thought of her as someone not worth fighting for. Someone whose feelings didn’t matter. *Assuming they even believe I have feelings*, she thought sadly. She looked at the screen.

Five minutes to Santa Rosa Station.

In those five minutes, Madelyn drifted to happier thoughts, thoughts that made her stronger. The recent rallies following the news of Katherine Hilario’s case, which had spread like wildfire all over the country in the course of its trial, two years after the murder itself. There were two approaches to the crime. First was the conservative Natural approach, where the main question asked was, “How on earth was a Synthetic child mistakenly sent to live with people who wanted a fellow Natural child?” Others had much more sense. “Equality for Synthetics!” Madelyn herself clamored with her brother and parents on the streets, more than once, following the example of their schools, churches, and other organizations. “Justice for Katherine! Equality for Synthetics!” First- and second-gens marched against teargas, drones, angry police officers, and synthephobes across the nation. Even the pop-rock superstar, Christopher Aguas, who was the biggest celebrity in the local music scene, wrote a song tribute for little Katherine, making her case even more famous.

Madelyn was midway through Christoph’s song when the bus reached the Santa Rosa stop. The driver turned to the man in the business suit. “You may call now.” Madelyn hurriedly put her handheld inside her dance bag and got off the bus.

Nelson was waiting for her at the stop. He was holding an umbrella. It was raining, and a slight chill drifted through the air. Madelyn smiled at her brother and hoped he didn’t see the tears in her eyes.

Then he cleared his throat. “That bus?” He raised his eyebrow at Madelyn. “It didn’t look like a—”

“Yes,” Madelyn said. “It was a long ride home.” She rolled her eyes. They laughed.

Nelson drove Madelyn home in his secondhand electric car. “I wrote another poem today, sis,” he said. “During break time.”

“That’s great,” Madelyn said, without looking up from her handheld. “I’d love to read it.” *Later*, she thought. She was reading something else right now. Several friends had just messaged her, as well as her dance teacher. Apparently, someone had posted a video of the altercation between her and the office suit man on several social media sites. It had gone viral within seconds and people were immediately able to identify Madelyn through the dance videos she had uploaded online.

*It’s the boy my age, the one with the handheld*, Madelyn realized, baffled by her unexpected fame. Already, there were hundreds of messages on her inbox, some from verified accounts. Maybe this would land her on a contract with a Neo Manila theatre. Maybe it would lead to Katherine’s justice. Either way, she was at the center of it. Something told her that she had only finished her first journey.