

Abstract

Two young lovers rendezvous in one of the old apartment units in Santa Mesa to escape the sweltering midday heat. This idle moment paves the way for exploring the nature of what seems like pure, youthful romance, before the view explodes to reveal the complexities and uncertainties behind their relationship. This is a portrait of two lives navigating the pressures of city-life, or the demands of a specific place—conveyed in prose that tries to capture its own convoluted nature.

Keywords

fiction
place
coming of age
Santa Mesa

APARTMENTS

COCOY LUMBAO, JR.

A HEAT WAVE, middle of the day, no air, the sun in its best form, the second street on the left is receiving its favor like no other, no shade, not much. Apartments were low and old. He entered one of them, followed by his companion, and it was like this during many other days, her, following him, checking through the wooden slats in the window, locking the door behind them, thinking about a future that deserves some attention, its hype, and all that excitement that came with other futures. She once thought about one where he would be with her, or she would be with him, there was confusion from the beginning, but they laid it to rest for some time to check the lock again, to hear the satisfying click on the knob, the snap on the bolt, which have now become tiny signals to a distant world they were procuring for themselves, miniature, yet hopefully reliable, and for the meantime, immovable.

He took out a chair for her to sit on, a worn out stool under the kitchen table, placing it in front of her, carefully and quietly, as it landed on a spot

to where she momentarily looked, then away to glance at something else, at some other furniture. His face adjusted in anticipation, to meet her eyes should they find their way back to his, which did so when she sat. His eyes froze like glass. Until this time there was only silence, their gracious host, their provider. Silence, being ever so hospitable and accommodating, granted them more than they could hope for, more than they needed. And he? He seldom agreed with silence, but for now, he thought it was a good change of pace. But in his mind, he never stopped asking, was it the room's silence, or her silence that engulfed him. While she, she never stopped listening.

She tried to remember what had happened earlier, when she was on her usual phone call, when lying was the only substitute for silence. She made the proper excuses, that she would be late coming in from summer school, that she needed time to spend with her friends, and needed cash to make that time useful, as well. She looked at her nails, bright with red polish, and fiddled with her hair, smooth and straight. She looked around the apartment, and figured everything was worth lying for, even the dull pain in her gut, the discomfort sitting on an old rickety stool had brought her, for the meantime, they were all worth it, fair.

There were sounds that broke the silence, every now and then, sounds that came from the streets, fruit vendors, fishmongers, junk traders, and laughter. They'd hear them, and remind them of the place that they were in, one which for now felt perfect. It reminded him of the street outside, his old playground. It reminded him of how he had first found her, walking in that street, and the remoteness of that image, the way it felt against other images of the same street, the drunken men at 3 PM, the bickering girls, the Santa Mesa boys showing off their bikes, the stray dogs and their droppings. Hers was unexpected, new and desirable. Her checkered uniform had become his distraction from his usual fantasies; the heels on her sandals had conjured a cadence that summoned longing, and other feelings to still comprehend.

She listened to him intently, but nervously, still, as with all other afternoons with him, when he finally broke the silence and asked, should I turn on the fan? It creaked for a moment before it propelled, smoothly, vigorously, swaying the strands of her hair and some of the cobwebs in a corner where a wooden altar rests, with two unlit, red bulbs. She let out a little laugh, giggled, while she looked at him and looked around, her hair gently, and alternately, being blown from right to left, timed by

the swiveling fan. Her way of looking around, and then of looking back at him, while smiling, laughing, was probably an unconscious attempt to save grace, to salvage what was left of her innocence, their innocence, perhaps, including his, or maybe, mostly his, she thought, when it didn't really matter especially now that she had slowly learned, from the way he stared at her, that these notions have already been replaced by something more profound, and more important, necessary, like desire.

When he looked at her, he wanted to say something more than about moving furniture, or turning on appliances, or asking how was school. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, but not now, but he knew he would, eventually. And he knew that he would someday end up there, too, in the university, he thought, he was confident, he had plans. During these moments with her, it was clear, he was going to study there, too, quite soon, he was going to college, he would earn his degree, as engineer or machinist, just like his estranged father and uncle, or maybe seafaring, just like his other uncle from his mother's family. These were not far-fetched notions every time he was with her, and the idea became clearer every time he began to touch her checkered uniform, and clearest every time he'd start to unzip it, to pull it down, and especially in that moment, where for a split second, he held her skirt in his hands before letting go. It was for him a glimpse to that unknown preoccupation, one which he could only fathom as something that was more respectful, sophisticated, and intelligent, than whatever he had going right now, and it lay there in this piece of checkered, black and white skirt that was sprawled on the floor, this image of success for him, of moving up, progressing, before it disappeared in the next hour or so and soon forgotten, entirely, like the floor had swallowed this piece of garment into an abyss, gone forever, at least momentarily, until she'd reach for it again to put on, later, hurriedly.

She had her own plans. Her idea of success was more pronounced, specific, and laid-out. She would land herself a nice job after graduation, in one of the fancier districts of Metro Manila, Ortigas or Makati, at the very least working as a receptionist in a three-star hotel, before maybe moving up to five-star, or maybe stay in three-star but at least move up to the managerial position or in public relations, maybe as a tour guide, that's alright, she thought. And then finally, after saving enough money, she would put up her own eatery, one that served all-day breakfasts for twenty-four hours. She loved to cook. She would cook and serve food herself, be part of the whole kitchen crew, running it, hands-on. She

imagined to have made enough money for herself to move her mother in a nice apartment in the city, and to have one of her little sisters look after their mother while she paid for her tuition. She felt responsible for them, not just for the sake of being responsible or having an overdeveloped sense of it but as a trait which she thought should always be tied with success, that her family should be part of it, too, and maybe success might not mean so much if others would not see it the way she did and in how she'd enjoy it. Maybe success for her was something she was not willing to bestow others with unless they acted kindly, maybe this was for her how she felt she was raised, or was just simply part of a sensible path to take, was simply the right thing to do. She was sure of the things she wanted to do but never really had given enough thought as to why she wanted to do them. It was the way things were with her but only to a certain degree.

He wanted her badly, but to what degree it was hard to tell, since he didn't have much to measure it against. The last time he wanted something so badly was when he saw one of those skateboards from a surplus shop in Pureza. She was his first girl, and he knew he loved her, even though it was still in its precarious stage. But at least he knew, and was certain, that this was a significant stage in his life. He had a girl now, and through her he had finally found out about the intricacies of sex. She was his first, when it came to both love and sex, which meant she was not only the first for trying out certain emotions he had crudely learned from reading local comics and watching TV, but also his first for seeing someone as a person's body, a specimen, a territory which he wanted to explore, like a cartographer.

This was summer, and he had a number of things to do, with both his friends and his mother, depending on the time of day, in the mornings out in the store, and in the afternoons with Rory who had a new pool table. But for this particular summer, a few things had to change. He went to the store to do the afternoon shift instead, to relieve his mother. And about his friends, he now seldom saw. But he had to see them still, he knew it was important, and these were mostly in the evenings after dinner when his mother also had something going on like playing a game of local poker with the neighbors. He saw his friends just for the sake of reminding them that he now had a girl, just for them to be able to tease him a little about it, which he secretly welcomed even though he never failed to show it was not a big deal, oftentimes while shaking his head. He knew they envied him a little, maybe because she was pretty and desirable,

or because she had a small face which made her look precious, or because she acted cool, adult-like, and they all saw these, together with him, while they were still fantasizing about her every time she walked the street.

She was always in the apartment when she was not somewhere else. On Friday nights, she was always out, also Saturdays, and some Tuesdays. She would tell him that she had to work part-time in a hotel, which should explain the hair, the make-up, and the dress. She sometimes had brought food with her, in special take-out wraps, and let him taste some of it. Here, try these special dumplings, authentic Chinese, she would tell him, and let him try the chopsticks between her fingers. She was also fond of his face, a little bit round at the edges with the exception of sharp, protruding cheekbones from a certain angle. And his skin, it was smooth and fair, and she liked that, too. And she can sense that he was smart, although not intelligent-smart nor street-smart but just plain sensible-smart. He was also younger, and for her, these things made him a little bit more precious than the others.

He never bragged about her even though he knew he could, even though he knew she was decidedly one of the most beautiful to walk these parts, and also the most delicate. He was a bit taller than the rest of the boys but he never really saw himself as the leader of the pack, although on some occasions, when called for, there were times when he had found himself leading them whenever action was required, like the first to throw rocks at a snarling dog, or the first to grab an old, abandoned dump truck's steel bars for climbing, just to see if they'd still hold. Now it felt like he had a bigger responsibility, it felt like he had to step up as someone who had a girl, as someone who had actual experience with matters concerning having one, which far outweighed the gang's other conundrums.

For the first time in a long while, she thought that she was wise, and was more experienced. She never really thought about love in the sense that it can be worth thinking about, she only used to think about how practical it could be. Mind first, heart second, was what she learned to say when she was younger, studying, excelling, and garnering praises and favor from her small town. She felt desire before, but not like this. Not as something she could withhold, depending on potential inconveniences. She thought about a boy named Mark, a boy her age, a boy she grew up with. She thought about the word crush and how Mark probably was her first crush, and how it quickly faded, this idea of being infatuated to someone who knew her too well. She sensed the predictability of things and saw the

familiar future, waiting for a husband, cooking while waiting, putting clothes on the back of kids, hers, which she knew she would love dearly but would also leave her wondering: what makes waking up to this world without a care be worth it? She marveled at the idea of control—with her mind, with her body (and even in sex), and argued for the importance of setting her own obligations. Not theirs. There's time for that, she thought.

He felt that his predicament held an important, unspoken obligation to his friends, that he was there in the company of friends to provide instruction, specifically in matters of sex, in its actuality, though when thoughts about this began to form in his mind he couldn't help but mildly exaggerate, or weed out the trivial parts, like how he first felt cold, or the trembling in his knees, or the awkward angle of his downward thrust that made him sometimes miss. Although his friend, Rory, had a penchant for talking about his own sexual experiences, they never really believed him considering the vagueness of his encounters and the crudeness of its details. *I fucked her, real hard*, was how Rory would tell them, without the weight of other particulars, no color, no time of day, those things didn't seem to matter to Rory. Whereas for him, he tried his best, to be instructive about it as much as he could. His was genuinely motivated by a concern for his friends' future reputations. Sometimes she'll guide mine with her hands to slip it inside gently, he'd begin to tell them, so there's nothing to worry about. He'd provide them other details which he thought might be useful, like she'd like to prop her knees with a pillow on certain positions, or, sometimes she'd chew some menthol before going down to make him feel good. And probably the most important of all, he said, you got to make sure to time it perfectly when pulling it out, and do yourself a favor not getting anyone pregnant. When he told this to his friends, they always acted as if they already knew.

She made a little pact with herself before coming to Manila, that she would become a better person doing this. She made considerable amount of money before leaving their hometown, which was enough for renting out a small bed space in Santa Mesa before moving into an apartment, to begin again, she thought, and live like the rest of them. As for who were they she wasn't quite sure, except those whom she thought were leading more useful lives in the city. Every now and then, she had seen, when someone would come back to their hometown, how their lives have been changed by a certain force, something that enabled them to walk more confidently, something that was able to remove something in them, an

exorcism, and she had seen this in her small barrio when she was young, how the possessed was relieved from a burden, a curse, equivalent to shame.

She knew about shame and how to eventually transform it into something more useful. She was once ashamed of her looks, not because she was ugly but because the way it brought out something sinister in men, men with wives and children, men with obligations to the church and public, and even young men who at times became impaled by stupidity when expressing their desires. Although she wouldn't admit how her looks became a kind of force in a given space and time, depending on other factors, she did acknowledge its function as a means for getting-by. Just getting by, she thought, until everything fell into place. It was a line that was often used, the phrase that accompanied the gifts from the men of her life, just for you to get by, for the meantime, and then the next promise for something more permanent. But there was never anything permanent, that's why she was still renting out instead of having her own place. She once dreamed of that and it was once offered, but the price was too high, she thought, so for the meantime--she settled with a new cellular phone, or some pocket money with enough to send back home.

Every time he touched her she would also wonder if she loved him. But again, like him, her comparisons were crude, telenovelas and gossip. But in him she felt something truer, but she also wondered about its usefulness. This is in exchange for something more authentic, she thought. There lies its value, she thought, for her to feel real, but in hindsight they were more fictitious than true, these mid-day trysts, secret rendezvous, and the closeness, the breathing from each other's breath, these were all fantasies.

He had nothing to give her now except a few more kisses to her shoulders and breasts. He is spent, and sweltering in the heat. She knew that there could be nothing more than this, but still, she needed him. What could he possibly give her, he asked himself, more fantasies? Romance? A normalcy, a realness whose window have become smaller and smaller, and harder to get by. She has needs, and her way to make ends meet shouldn't be taken against her. He is her window, her jalousie with a missing slat, a door left ajar, just in case she needed to breathe, in case she wanted out. She loved men, but she'll love this one because he made her feel real, and only realness deserves happiness, success.

He untangled himself from her and apologized for the sweat, made a crease on the bed sheet to measure the dampness it may have caused,

he noticed again the absurd design on its pattern, cats and mice, going around, chasing each other. One had a round hammer indicated by a swinging motion, aimed at a little mouse with diaper. Cartoons, he thought, and the silliness of it. She went by the window, still naked, and opened a row of slats before quickly jumping back in bed to pull the sheets to cover her. There, she said, a little bit of air. But with the slightest of breeze came a harsh ray of sun, an intruder, opportunistic. Her apartment was facing west and it was almost after noon. He felt the heat again; she saw droplets of perspiration form around his mouth.

Every now and then he would look around him and marvel at her room. It was both familiar and strange. He lived exactly in the same kind of apartment, which were only a few blocks away. They lived in an old housing zone, where structures were identical, row after row. They had the same cabinet, the same floor plan for the kitchen and bathroom, but the arrangement of furniture, the walls' color, and angle of light and shadows transported him into another place entirely, and made them appear alien. Where her dresser stood was, back in theirs, his mother's sewing machine. Her kitchen table was a foldable aluminum resting against a wall while theirs was a round lazy Susan, right in the middle. Even though the size and shape of the apartments were the same, it felt like he'd get lost before finding his way. It was surprisingly disorienting, and he wanted to stay longer, but she'd always tell him, you have to leave.

The afternoons were for studying, she told him, the evening for her rest. But before he complied to these rules they goofed around a little more, crawled under the blanket, pretended it was their own universe, mocked the cats and mice prints as their loyal subjects, wrestled each other's naked bodies into submission, tossed and turned, and laughed as silently as they could, making faces. It was late in the afternoon, the sun heading to the bay. Funny, he said, when he got up and began to get dressed, it's the same window, but a different view. Funny, she also thought herself, when just last summer she was a lady bed spacer from the other street. Now, she's here, in one of these old apartments, same as everyone's, alongside each other's secrets and misery, only a wall apart. She liked it, but she also thought, not for long.

Shush, she told him, when her phone vibrated, and then hunched over the side of the bed, with a finger in front of his face to signal, one moment. She talked low-key. He wondered if it was a new phone, silver and shiny, it was the first time he'd seen it, he thought. He seldom saw that kind of

phone anyway, those mobile types, at least not from these parts. He heard a faint voice, a man's, probably, it rumbled low, like something that spoke from underwater. He had heard this before, had witnessed some calls, and had seen her at times speak like a younger girl, far removed from how he saw her now.

One of those college boys of yours, he asked in jest. She punched him lightly on his shoulder, don't be silly. There was silence again at this point, much more than what they needed. The window view has changed into a deeper sunset, a darker hue, shadows have left the room but thank god it was not as humid anymore, but was still warm. She threw a blank stare at him, and then looked outside, not on the clouds turning crimson, but to the rusted grills that hung from her window. It was my uncle, she said, remember my uncle? Not really, he said, though he might have. Anyway, she said, I think I'll be moving into another apartment, a bigger one, by the river, one of those new townhouses that they built over there. It's quite farther now, he thought, it would at least take one ride from here, and he'd never been in that part of the city, and suddenly pictured himself assembling his bike again. It's quite beautiful there, he said, this uncle of yours must be really generous.

She smiled, both of them did. Hers was due to a slight annoyance, his was about the possible re-purposing of an old bike. The concepts that guide them together are sometimes held by moments in abeyance, by either questions or stories withheld from each other, not because they retracted them but mainly because of a distractedness caused by their own desires, the desires which sometimes had nothing to do with love, though it was easy to perceive, or maybe more conveniently to conclude, that what they had would be normally regarded as true love, which was always more fanciful, and more often than not headed into either something complicated, or just plain disastrous.

He was finally fully clothed, ready to go, about to leave, kissing her goodbye, and wanting to escape the heat. She unwrapped the blanket around her, wanting more of him, but also understood that he had nothing to give her, therefore she can't give him everything. Not everything. In his own way, he also understood this, and tried to let go, and realized that this was just the beginning of trying to understand things about her in his own way, while she tried to make understanding more purposeful, ideas and change, excitement and obligations, the buildup of noise outside the streets and the dampening of air, blank walls white light and the absence

of tragedy, at least for a moment, the absence of predictability and chore, and in hindsight, vulnerability, and his, in his own mind, the absence of consequences, and asked her, before leaving, would it be too much to ask your uncle for some air conditioning if you ever get this new place of yours? She smiled, more relieved than happy, and answered—no, not at all.