

### Abstract

Stella goes to the only *funeraria* in the town of Mayabo and encounters her *chismosa* classmate from elementary school as the receptionist. Not recognizing her, Vangie gossips about the infamous cadaver that arrived the night before: Was Katrina Langitan an NPA member, a prostitute, or a drug addict?

### Keywords

multilingualism  
chismis  
LGBTQ

# BALIKBAYAN

---

---

RAYJI DE GUIA

IT TOOK HALF an hour to reach the only funeraria around these parts. The tricycle had made a sharp turn into the street leading into town, almost grazing the weather-worn Marian grotto beside the corroding metalwork of WELCOME TO MAYABO, then stopped abruptly just past the gas station. Mother of Mercy Funeral Homes was a nondescript building, painted white, with a gated garage to one side. It could easily be mistaken for a house if not for the tarpaulin hanging at the edge of the roof, sun-bleached cursive letters bearing the name. Bundles of snake plants fenced the property and extended to various overgrowth at the back, while mani-mani, pansit-pansitan, and small patches of carabao grass covered the ground on either side of the paved path and between misshapen, uneven slabs. An assortment of plants lined the facade, but the largest was a shrub of dama de noche whose lush leaves and long, thin buds half-obscured the jalousie window. The sickly floral scent assailed Stella's nostrils, inducing a sort of vertigo;

pinprick sensations dispersed to her nape, the length of her back, her shoulders and arms. Her exhaustion was as heavy as the humidity in the air—the swelling coat of paint on the wall, the drip-like stains of black mold on glass strips, and the eaves over her head sagging from corrosions and rot. She pushed the front door open with difficulty.

The plan was for Stella and her boyfriend, Aaron, to stay in Nüwa Manila for a couple of nights before driving a rented car for a day trip to Mayabo to see her parents and a close friend. Earlier, however, when she'd called her mother to let her know she'd landed in NAIA, all she understood through the sobbing was that her missing sister finally surfaced. A funeraria in Cavite City had contacted them because, by some miracle, the mortician was the friend of her sister's friend and had visited Mayabo enough times to recognize her. They would not have known about it otherwise.

Even indoors, the smell of *dama de noche* followed Stella, clinging to her skin, staying—or perhaps it was clinging to every surface within the vicinity. At the sound of chimes, the receptionist behind a shabby desk looked up from a pack of *chicharon*. A childhood classmate, Stella noted with a grimace.

“Good morn—ay, it's four—good afternoon!” greeted Vangie Lapid with her infamous *bores-ipsis* from Mayabo Elementary School, shrill as ever and far too cheery inside a funeraria. She tilted her snack in offer. “Kain?”

Stella raised her left hand. “No, thanks,” she said. Under the fluorescent lights, the gold band around her finger glinted.

“What can I do for you, madame?”

That surprised Stella; Vangie didn't recognize her. Although her appearance had definitely changed since elementary school, she didn't expect this. All the better, she thought. There were many people in Mayabo with whom she did not want to reconnect. To have Vangie, of all people, made aware of her exact purpose in this funeraria, it would be a cruel type of accident. She just wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

“I'm here for—um, a body? I called the manager this morning.”

“Well, there's a lot of bodies in there,” replied Vangie with a smile. She gestured toward the white plastic stool in front of her desk. “But sit down, Mang Resti's just in the morgue. All-around guy here. If you called, then I'm sure he'll be out soon.”

Stella obliged, rubbing her gold ring anxiously. Out the window, sunlight diminished, and the sky dimmed. Vangie resumed munching on

her chicharon, chin resting on a clean hand, while she slid a pinky finger across the screen of her phone. Once she finished her snack, she dusted her hand to one side then inhaled audibly. Stella turned to her.

“So—” Vangie began, then paused, lips twisting in thought, but only for a moment. “Okay, so I discovered something. I don’t know you, which means you’re not from around here, so I’ll tell you.” She clasped her hands together and beamed. “One of the bodies inside is a celebrity. Transported last night from another funeraria.”

“Really.”

The voice that came out of Stella was hoarse, like the clatter of the ceiling fan above them. A distant thunder rumbled in unison, a warning of rain. But it was only a warning. Whether only a drizzle or a pouring onslaught, it’d be unknown until it happened. The climate in this country was fickle, and she was annoyed with herself for not bringing an umbrella. It rarely flooded in Mayabo, but it was not unheard of. She remembered the flash of flood up to her knees in her childhood, the muddy floors, the catfish swimming between her legs, lasting barely an hour before it all streamed down to submerge low-lying towns elsewhere.

“Well, I saw her name on Facebook this morning,” said Vangie, “which is celebrity status nowadays.”

“Hmm.”

“Since tokhang, diba, bodies just come and go, even in Mayabo, pero usually *nobodies* sila—” She covered her mouth to stifle a laugh. “—but business has been good for my boss, because Mercy is police-accredited. Sometimes she gets us pizza. Anyway, this one, Katrina Langitan, they said she’s an NPA member who went down the mountains to recruit the squatters in Kawit.”

Stella frowned. “How so?” she asked.

The first patter of rain resounded from the roof and window. Heat licked her face before dissipating, leaving only the smell that diffused from soil. For Americans, it was called petrichor, a pleasant, cozy term. But to her, it always seemed musty, the ascent of putrefaction to the living: amoy-lupa. Her sister hated the rainy season for this reason. Mabantot, she would say. With the dama de noche, the mingling in the atmosphere was overwhelmingly foul in this tiny reception area.

The last memory Stella had of her sister was in NAIA, through the blurry tarpaulin window of an owner-type jeep, through her tears. Katrina had

stood in line with the other passengers outside the terminal entrance with only a backpack and a worn-out luggage donated by a relative, too small for someone who was supposed to stay in America for five years. Their father drove away before Katrina had gone inside, waving and waving at them until the crowd, vehicles, and buildings had swallowed her. How she'd ended up dead in Cavite City, Stella could not figure out at all.

"It was a Facebook post," answered Vangie. "I forgot the name of the person who posted it. I think it was a government spokesperson, something of the sort, responding to whiny people online, like calling justice for this and that, ibagsak, ibagsak. Pero, hala, I don't think Katrina Langitan's an NPA! I knew her."

At least not in any meaningful way, since Vangie was not friends with her. At a loss for words, Stella simply decided to ask, "Were you her friend?"

"Ay, no, more of with her brother."

Of course not.

"Talaga ba?"

"Actually, he wasn't my friend either, but he was my seatmate for six years. We both had surnames starting with L." Vangie leaned over the desk to whisper, "Between you and me, the only thing I remember about him was how he pooped his pants in class."

Vangie Lapid had always been a chismosa, a nonstop talker to this day.

In Mayabo, the best place to get a haircut was at Krystala Salon, a beauty parlor owned by Juday, the all-around parlorista: hairdresser, beautician, manicurista, and pedicurista. When the superhero fantaserye starring Judy Ann Santos aired some years ago, Juday changed the name from Esperanza Salon.

Sliding the door open, Katrina stepped inside. Standing next to a salon chair, Juday met her eyes through the mirror, spun around, and gasped dramatically.

"Uy, your clothes, ha, ang gara. Don't tell me you're leaving today na? So soon?"

Katrina slapped her friend's arm. "Now you're just pretending."

"Yes." Juday smiled sadly. "Are you really going? Is this really it?"

"I have to. It's for Stella—"

She rolled her eyes and flipped her palm with every other word. "—and your Inay and your Itay and the hundred thousand pesoseses you need to pay back." She heaved a huge sigh. "I know."

“Yes. Them and the money.” Katrina sighed as well. She took in Juday’s pink lipstick, orange spaghetti strap paired with studded white tokong, and hoop earrings, committing them to memory. “Itay borrowed Tiyo Pog’s jeep, so they can see me off,” she said. “I’m here to say goodbye. I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you rin, bakla,” replied Juday, pouting, and took her friend’s hands. “How’s Stella? Is she okay?”

“Her eyes were red and puffy this morning. I heard her sniffing last night. Right now she’s trying not to cry, but she asked me to sit at the back with her.”

“She’s not taking it well, ‘no? Ikaw kasi, e.”

Katrina nodded. “She’s trying. But Juday, will you check in with her every now and then? Invite her for merienda when she comes home during weekends. She starts college next month.”

“Everything’s happening so fast, I can’t take it, Katrina! Stella’s going to be a kolehiyala na. D’yos ko, my heart, mashaket. Ang shaket-shaket. If you’re not here, would she even want to come home?”

“I also told her to check in on you, so that you don’t drink too much Coke. You’re her second mom, her Mader Juday. She needs your guidance. And you need to stop drinking soft drinks.”

“Okay, sigel!” cried Juday. “Basta take care of yourself over there. Don’t let Americans treat you badly, ha? If they do, jombagin mo, pramis?”

“Yes, jojombagin ko.”

“I’m about to tear up, so tama na! No drama! Last hug, last beso. Okay, go, babush!”

“Labyu, Juday.”

“Labyu too. Call me when you can. And they’re more liberated over there, so find a jowabels to tira your kepyas!”

“Gaga ka!” laughed Katrina as she turned to leave. “Bye, BFF!”

“So Katrina, the sister, she’s a lot older, and she was a teacher before then. Imagine my shock when I heard—from her best friend, no less, who’s my cousin’s aunt on the other side, and it was my cousin who told me—that Katrina, she worked in a beer house in Cavite City. Near the Navy.”

The last words were uttered in emphasis.

Stella closed her eyes for a couple of seconds and then asked, “Near the Navy?”

The rain outside picked up. Vangie tried to talk louder, which only made her voice shriller.

“Yes, Mumsh, catch up naman. Hostess, go-go dancer, GRO to soldiers away from home. Pampalipas oras, ganern. D’yos ko, she taught kids!”

“There must have been a reason,” said Stella, her own voice simply an echo to her own ears. A soldier next to a woman who was not his wife—it was an all too familiar image.

“They were really poor, kaya kapit sa patalim.”

Instinctively, Stella thumbed her ring. “I see.”

She didn’t know what to believe when it came to Vangie’s chismis, but one thing that was true was how poor they were. Katrina had left her job in Mayabo Elementary School to teach white children in Texas, so that Stella, she’d been told, could pursue fine arts in college. From days, to months, then years, Katrina never called, never sent any money. Instead, Stella had to shift to only study art, because making art required expensive materials. She resented the fact that she had to live in a condo owned by a distant aunt. It was a spacious studio unit for Tiya Bening’s two daughters, who had attended a university near Stella’s. What had seemed like a taste of luxury for the first time in her life was dampened in no time. For the unimaginable hundreds of thousands of pesos owed by her sister, Stella had to return this utang na loob by cleaning the condo every now and then—a gracious request that turned sour when it became undeniable that Katrina had disappeared and, with her, any chance of repayment.

“In a way, gets ko,” said Vangie, shrugging. “If I had a choice, I wouldn’t sit here surrounded by corpses.”

In the four years that Stella had lived in that hellish condo, she was the unpaid yaya and atsay of her cousins, who would vindictively pour soup in the trash and throw food morsels in the sink drain. They’d order her around by saying her name in a mocking tone, if not outright calling her bakla or bading. She could only confide to Mader Juday; her parents would not have understood. After she graduated, she hadn’t encountered maggots again, even if she let her trash sit in for more than a month. With her first salary, she committed to pay the debt to Tiya Bening every month. It was a pledge to herself to never be under the influence of utang na loob again. She had a choice; she took it. Eventually, she was able to put a fraction for birth control pills, which she purchased from an online seller, so that she would not hear her name uttered the way her cousins did anymore. She’d known self-medication was less effective, but that was her only option then.

“There’s another thing . . . so I have a suitor.” From there on, Vangie couldn’t stop grinning as she spoke, her voice giddier. “He’s a police officer, just got assigned here last year. So macho, with abs! Unlike most police and their bellies.”

Despite the confusing detour, Stella tried to look interested.

It was past seven in the evening when the Saulog bus arrived in Mayabo. Katrina took a tricycle to Krystala Salon, which was already closed. The whole town was shrouded in darkness, with only the sparse lampposts and house windows for lighting. She rattled her palms against the roll-up metal door. “Juday? Juday?”

“Wait, wait, I’ll unlock the door. Teka lang.”

After a few minutes, she heard the glass door slide open followed by the fumbling of metal, which was then pulled up.

“Come in,” said Juday, flipping the light on.

Katrina collapsed on the waiting bench with her backpack.

“It’s late na, bakla—o, anyare?” Juday closed the glass door, then sat next to her friend. “Why’s your face like that? Was your visa not—?”

“It’s approved,” replied Karina, shaking her head. She tried to smile as she delivered the good news. “I have it. I have the visa. I’m flying.”

“Why don’t you look happy then? I’ll get you a drink. Coke, okay lang?”

Her throat was dry. “Sure, thanks.”

Juday made for the side door that led to her kitchen. She called out, “Was Agnes with you?”

“Yes, but her visa didn’t get approved, so she went home early. I had to stay though.”

“Balahurang beklaruch, that Agnes. She left you.” Juday returned with two bottles with straws. “Sarpriza, we don’t have Coke, just Sarsi.”

“I mean, I understand. We’ve done so many things for our application. A lot of things. Commuting back and forth to Manila is just impyerno. Then the fees for everything. I think she took out a loan. I would have felt terrible also. Baka nga I’d have sobbed in front of them all, right then and there.”

“So why are you close to crying now?”

“Di a! I’m not close to . . . I’m actually happy, but I’m just so exhausted. There’s still so much to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those at the agency, the recruiters, they told me there are still more fees. The . . . rest of the fees.”

“Hala ka, there’s more, bakla? How much pa?”

“Seven hundred thou—”

Juday inhaled with indignation. “Katreng! That’s a million in total. Where are you getting the payment for the rest? Wa na you datung.”

“I was shocked at first.”

“I don’t think just at first. Look at yourself in the mirror. Do’n o, look.”

“No, no, I’m fine. They explained to me that I can pay the rest while I’m there, bit by bit, over the years.”

“Sa trulity, are you sure this is not trafficking? Are they really legit? I saw a woman on the news jailed in Malaysia. She thought she was gonna get employed as a maid, then at the airport, they found drugs in her luggage—zippers, linings, ganon.”

“I don’t think they’re that kind of people. And I told you, the agency is accredited. I met my employers during the interview. They even said I have good English. They seem nice. Besides, it’s just going to be a few years. Five or so, then I’ll finish paying the fees.”

“In five years, Stella’s also going to finish college already. Less than, even.”

“I’ll have enough to send. There will be a way. ‘Di ba, it’s the States. Everything’s there.”

“D’yos ko, ‘day, you’re going to exhaust yourself until you’re tigok na. Why don’t you just not go?”

“I’m already at this stage. I can’t just give up, Juday.”

“Don’t you have a boylet na yamanechi? Mark? He’s an engineer. His family owns the gas station along the highway.”

“Oh, si Mark. I refused kasi when he asked to court me. You know I don’t have time for that kind of thing—men, pagpapaliligaw, having a syota.” Katrina crossed her arms. “Why don’t you just marry me, Juday?”

“Gaga ka, take me out first. I’m not that kind of girlalu. I’m dalagang Pilipina kaya.”

“We can eat turo-turo at the plaza.”

Juday coughed out a laugh. “I know you just want me for my wealth since I’m the best parlorista in Mayabo.”

“And your beauty, too! I’ll be a good husband! Peksman, cross my heart.”

“He comes here often,” said Vangie. “The police chief kind of turned him into an errand boy—that’s how I met him—to bring gifts to the owner,



my boss. At the station, they nicknamed her Ginang Kabaong. My suitor's favorite is Aba Ginang Kabaong, like a prayer, because she's super close to the chief, their Panginoon. Oh, sometimes he brings me his own gift, like fishball, kwek-kwek, isaw, whatever's on the way—oh."

Stella knitted her brow. "And then?"

"Wait," said Vangie slowly, as if realizing something. Her mouth formed a big circle. She gasped, "They're having an affair!"

"Ha?"

"They knew each other from college. Manileños, you know? Wow . . . the Manileño wife of a Somoza, my boss, kabet at may kabet. Never misses a Sunday mass, pero eskandalosa pala!"

"Why . . . is the police chief of Mayabo not someone from here?"

"Local officers get assigned elsewhere. Apparently, they're too nice to people they know from childhood—mga tiyo, tiya, pinsan, kababata, kapitbahay—all would get away hanggang bakla, tomboy, butiki, baboy." She scoffed. "But a crime's a crime, right?"

"So, how's this related to Katrina Langitan again?"

"Tekang lang, bes, I was getting there. My suitor—okay, his name's Ramon—"

With a giggle, Vangie pushed back strands of hair behind an ear.

Stella rubbed her tired eyes. "Kinilig, ampota," she couldn't help blurting out under her breath.

"So, Mon was here earlier—he got me the chicharon, he's so sweet—but my boss went to Manila. He couldn't stay too long, but I asked if he knew anything about the new arrival. He told me that she's not just, you know, a dancer. I mean, obviously, but then, she's also—" She leaned close again, and in a grave tone, she said, "She's a drug addict."

As she straightened up, she rapped on the desk with her fingers. Their deep-red nail polish seemed to have been hastily removed and now appeared like dried blood on her hands.

"And a dealer to big-time clients," she added. "Shabu."

"You sure?"

Vangie rolled her eyes. "Malamang. He's police."

"Right."

There was a time that Katrina came close to having charges pressed against her. One afternoon as a sophomore, Stella had been sitting on the edge of a flower box near the volleyball court. As she waited for her sister to wrap up the training session for the girls' varsity team, someone had

shrieked across the quadrangle—an apoplectic woman yelling Katrina’s name. Katrina had started to back away, and in panic, she spiked the spare volleyball in her hands, smacking the woman in the face so hard she almost fell back on concrete. She turned out to be the jealous fiancée of the mayor’s son, who had remarked, “That volleyball coach from the high school, medyo may mukha, ano?” Stella had watched through the window of the principal’s office as her sister explained that she hadn’t even personally met the mayor’s son, sobbing and apologizing for the bruises she’d caused. The principal had convinced the woman to not push through with her threats.

“When Katrina Langitan and her drug dealer friends realized they were in a buy-bust,” said Vangie, “they fired at each other. Didn’t know who the informant was. Police didn’t even need to shoot. Mang Resti said she sustained eight bullet wounds.”

“That’s too many.”

Even though she was an English teacher, Katrina had also worked as a volleyball coach. Inside the classroom, she carried herself in a timid manner, curving her back and clasping her hands to her stomach as she delivered her lectures haltingly. Coaching, however, had been where she was most comfortable. Her long hair, always in a ponytail, and shy demeanor gave many the illusion that she was feminine. In reality, there was a level of wildness in her movement, magaslaw, and other teachers had commented on how tomboyish she could be—a masculinity Stella failed to possess, they’d add when out of Katrina’s earshot but not Stella’s. Stella had to become a maldita to survive them; she’d often shoot back to her classmates and teachers, “What am I, a pashnea like you? Pang-sang’gre kaya this beauty!”

After the customer left the parlor, Katrina carefully laid out the paper plates of street food on the waiting bench. “Isaw, o, and betamax. These are from the vendors near the elementary, not the ones at the plaza.”

Juday dusted off the chair cloth. “Bonggacious! Ay, pwe, pwe. Yak.” She coughed and picked a stray hair from her mouth. Throwing the cloth aside, she walked toward the bench. “Uy, that’s more expensive, ha, but more delicious. Their betamax, the tindero said, they adobo it, ‘di ba, garlic, soy sauce, vinegar.”

“Yep. It’s a minicelebration. I have my certificate now. Tiya Bening is sending me the money soon. I have the interview schedule with the school admin from Texas.”

“Oh, wow, are they coming in just to interview you all?”

Katrina took a bite from her stick and beamed. “Yes, we’re that important to them, I think!” she said, chewing. “Seems they really need us. I’ll take them out, sina Inay, Itay, saka Stella, on Saturday. We’ll go to SM and eat at Jollibee. That’s also when I’ll tell Stella about my going to the States.”

Juday fished something from her front pocket, then held it out. “Hmmp, here.”

“What’s this?” Katrina took the small, thin box. “Lipstick?”

“I bought new makeup things because I’m running out, so this is extra.”

“I don’t really wear stuff on my face, pero, okay, thank you, Juday, I appreciate it. Oh, and I’m thinking of getting Stella something—”

Juday cackled. “I figured you’ll ask that! The lipstick is not for you. You’ll just let it waste away in a drawer while you’re in Texas. Give it to Stella, my junakis.”

“Ah, I see. Then how much is this? I’ll pay for it—”

“No need, ano ba. Tell her it’s a graduation gift from both of us. Para kabog, ‘di ba, when she goes to her classes in college. Pak! Saka she’ll be upset that you’re leaving her, so use that as band-aid for now.”

Katrina turned over the box in her hand. The shade, called Beauty Shine, was a light, glossy red color, almost pink. Although it seemed subdued enough for a freshman kolehiyala, it could make Stella stand out if she wanted to. That gave Katrina a sense of hope.

“Thank you, Mader Juday.”

The rain abated to a drizzle, allowing the afternoon sun to brighten in time for golden hour. The perfume of *dama de noche* lingered, intensifying even more as time went on. Stella returned her gaze to Vangie, who was still speaking:

“I tried to press him for more info but that’s all he’d tell me. Nakakawindang, girl, a woman of many things! She must’ve been so busy the whole time she disappeared. Family hasn’t seen her in ten years, more than.”

“A long time to disappear, yeah.”

“Can’t tell which is worse, komunista, pokpok, o adik.”

“Dead. It’s worse to be dead.”

“Well, duh, pero grabe, ‘no?’”

“Grabe,” Stella echoed.

“So, that’s it. Where are you from?”

“Just nearby.”

“Ternate? Or Mayabo? Maragondon?”

“Ternate for now.”

“¿Hablás Bahra, ñora?”

“Ha?”

Vangie chuckled. “No one does—”

There was a cough, followed by, “Mr. Langitan?”

Neither of the women had noticed the manager’s arrival. He stood by the archway on the far side of the reception area. Mang Resti, a short man around his fifties and who wore a faded, oversized basketball jersey, squinted on a sheet in his hand. He pushed his glasses up his nose and scanned the room.

“Four daw,” he muttered and clicked his tongue.

Sighing, Stella rose from her seat and walked up to him. He stood only up to her chest.

“Actually, it’s Ms. Langitan,” she said. With her thumb, she touched her ring again. “And yes, I’ve been waiting since four o’clock.”

Mang Resti raised his eyebrows. “Sorry for making you wait,” he replied. “Ms. Langitan, follow me.”

With that, she left her classmate from Mayabo Elementary School, Vangie Lapid, now receptionist to Mother of Mercy Funeral Homes, in a state of open-mouthed, wide-eyed shock. By now, Stella had grown accustomed to that kind of reaction to the point of indifference. It could even be amusing sometimes. Growing up, she had a love-hate relationship with what others called her, *bakla*, but her Mader Juday embraced it fully that she found herself getting attached to it. She’d say it out loud to herself, enunciated carefully, tenderly, to counter the memories of her cousins, classmates, and teachers. The label of trans woman, she’d come across later on, and it fit. She’d always considered herself different from expectations.

As a teenager, she wondered about pronouns in English; she’d had this odd perception that English and Tagalog were antonyms and should be equivalent in translation, but Tagalog only had one set of pronouns for the singular third person: *siya*, *niya*, and *kanya*. Soon after Katrina’s explanation on genders, Stella had concluded, “I think I am a ‘she.’” Katrina had tilted her head thoughtfully and replied in English, “She . . . hmm. She thinks she should be referred to as a ‘she.’ I agree with her.” Then in Tagalog: “It’s easier *din*, since ‘she’ sounds like *siya*.” When Stella later asked her Mader Juday what pronoun to

use for her in English, she was told, “Any-any is fine! I can’t spokening dollar anyway.”

“I have news! I have news, Judeng!”

“Your new hairstyle? Like sabukot, Dios mio, Katreng.” Juday pulled Katrina to a salon chair. “Go. Talk while I fix it. What do lawyers say in teleseryes when something is free?”

“Pro bono ata.”

“I’ll fix your hair, pro bono. What’s the chika?”

Karina grinned excitedly. “I heard from Agnes—”

“The vice-principal? I thought you hated her. Are you buddy-buddy now?”

“I don’t hate her. She’s just, you know, she has a bit of an ugali if she thinks you don’t admire her.”

Juday loosened her hair from her ponytail and sifted through the tangles.

“She was in a good mood this morning though,” continued Katrina, “so she shared this news: There’s an agency in the States looking for public school teachers here!”

“Uy, American Dream, bakla, are you going to apply then? Pero, legit ba ‘yan, uy, there’s a lot of scams these days.” Juday waved the brush in her hand. “You don’t know where you’d end up.”

“It’s not a scam. It’s a recruitment agency by a Pinoy.”

“As if Pinoys don’t scam. Just this morning, I went to the palengke, and when I got home, I weighed my rice—shuta, less by a guhit!”

“Filipino American naman, so they’re not like us. They’re decent. Besides, the agency is accredited by POEA. The name’s Alpha-Global Placement. Sounds nice to the ears, right?”

“Hmm-mm. So what now, are you applying?”

“Yes, I think this is too good an opportunity to pass up. Dollars, Juday, imagine. We’d have marble floors—no, not marble. Tiles are what’s use now. So tiles with design. Inay and Itay will get their own bedroom. Stella, too, because she’s growing up, and she needs her own space to study and make her drawings. I just need to get a special certification to teach, borrow some cash—I think Tiya Bening, even Tiya Maneng, they’ll lend me some thousands—”

“Wait, certification? Thousands? What? Why do you need to do so much? Sure ka ba?”

"I'm an English teacher, which is an advantage, since I can speak English better than others, but why would an American want to learn English from me, a Filipino? No, they want science, math, or PE teachers. I'll do PE since I've been coaching the varsity. I have a bit of savings, so I won't need to borrow all the three hundred thousand pesos for the recruitment fee."

"Katrina, nakakaloka, is this for real? It's too much. Three. Hundred. Thousand." Juday said slowly, emphasizing each syllable, "This is so unlike you, so sudden in your decisions."

"The way we're living now, Inay doing laundry, if her amo calls her in, and Itay doing carpentry if someone needs repairs. . . . They think this is enough, that we should be grateful for anything we have. I'd be fine with that, you know. But . . ." Katrina bowed her head. She fumbled with her hands on her lap. "I know it's not enough for Stella. There was a time I caught her taking coins from my bag, and when she saw me, she froze there. Her eyes were wide in fear, in . . . in guilt. Then she shook all over, her mouth, her shoulders, and cried." Katrina brought her gaze up to the mirror to meet Juday's.

Juday covered her mouth, her eyes moist.

"Sorry daw, she said, sorry again and again," said Katrina, "and I hugged her. I felt so bad. I asked her what she needed money for. She told me, after she's calmed a bit, that she just couldn't last the day in school with only one meal, a cup of rice and just vegetables, no meat, no merienda . . . and she said sorry again, because she also wanted to buy Mongol pencils, because the cheap ones I'd give her from the faculty supplies are not good for drawing."

Juday sniffed loudly. "Hala, naku, that pains my heart," she said, fanning her eyes. "Sobra. You know, Stella's like my own child. She's my *junak-junakan na*. I'd be willing to pitch in a bit if I earn extra, so she won't get hungry. I can even bring her lunch from time to time, so she doesn't have to buy at the canteen."

"It's not just that, although super thank you, really. It's also . . . well . . . basta. Agnes is applying, so she'll be with me during the whole process."

"You two really are buddy-buddy now, huh," said Juday, making a face.

"Honestly, I'm scared about all this. It would be nice to have someone."

"Well, if you stay, *'di ka mashoshokot*. You'll have me. We're BFFs."

"You'll always be my BFF, even when I'm in the States. We can do the online-online. I'll ask Stella to teach me. I can never be as *kalog* with anyone else."

“So you’re really going through with this? Shuta ka, you’re leaving us.”

“Pero when I get rich, I’ll be able to fly home from time to time. We can swim in Ternate. At the Marines.”

“Yuck, Boracay de Cavite? You’re so cheap. We’ll go to the real Boracay!”

Stella took another tricycle to get back to the resort, one of many along the coasts of Ternate. The room was almost bare, cream-painted walls and tiled wooden flooring, with a king-sized bed flanked by lampshades on tables. The floor-to-ceiling glass windows were foggy in the aftermath of rain, and the setting sun was a haze of orange against the darkening sky. Her boyfriend sprawled on the bed, a local magazine in his hands. It was a relief to return to some semblance of normalcy, without the fickle weather, the invasive smell of *dama de noche*, or Vangie’s *bores-ipis*—a temporary reprieve from everything that was Mayabo.

Aaron looked up from the magazine. “Hey, babe, how’d it go?”

“Hey.” She sat at the end of the bed, her back to him, and yawned. “Can you talk in English some more? I wanna pretend we’re back in New York.”

“Of course. My pleasure, since it’s the only language I know.”

Stella pulled a duffle bag to her lap and rummaged inside “It was a lot,” she said, taking out her pill bottle. “The manager led me to the morgue so I could officially identify Ate Katrina. It’s her, I told him, it’s my sister.”

“Oh, babe, that must be so . . . um . . .”

“He looked at me weird.”

“How weird?”

Aaron had been acquainted with the way other Filipinos looked at them since their arrival at the airport. A white American man holding the hand of a brown Filipino woman, trans or not—another all too familiar image. Even without the awareness of his being a veteran.

But she was not like them, she told herself, because she had met him in an arts theory class in the first year of her master’s program, before she had enough savings to see a doctor to medically transition. By then, her self-medicated birth control pills merely softened her face. It happened in the States.

“Like he was waiting for me to sob,” she clarified, “just waiting for a whole minute while we stood next to my sister, until I couldn’t stand the smell anymore.”

“Was it bad? Like dead subway rat bad?”

“Nothing. Like nothing. There were flowers outside, and the smell was so strong, but inside the morgue, it was nothing all of a sudden. Sterile.”

“Okay.”

“I guess that’s what’s expected when you’re there, to cry? The thing is, her face looked the same, as if she hasn’t aged, as if . . .” Back when they were much younger, she remembered asking her mother one time, *Where’s Ate?* “Naroon sa papag, tulog, nagpapahangin na naman sa bentilador—”

That was what she had asked herself for over a decade: *Where’s Ate?* It was during her last year in college that she thought she found a piece in the puzzle. It was all over the news, a lawsuit against Alpha-Global Placement in America by the exploited Filipino teachers, whose passports and visas were confiscated until they paid the exorbitant recruitment fees. As Stella read about the state in which the teachers were forced to live, it broke her heart. She called her parents and they wept until her mobile load credit ran out. But despite everything, there was a glimmer of hope, because it had meant her sister did not abandon them. What happened then? What had Katrina become?

“I didn’t catch that,” said Aaron. “Venti laid, what?”

“Sorry, I meant, she looked asleep. Maybe that’s why. . . . Anyway, she’s coming home tomorrow. The wake will last for a week before she gets cremated.”

“Didn’t you say your parents wanted her buried?”

“They wouldn’t be able to pay for it. At the cemetery here, if you can’t afford a permanent spot, you rent a niche for five or so years. We call it an apartment.”

Caught in the orange sunset, the band of her ring was magnificent. She watched the distorted colors dance on the gold surface.

“If you couldn’t pay for the next years,” she continued, “they unearth the remains and leave them somewhere for you to pick up.”

“That’s really shitty. And I’ve seen some massively shitty things as a vet.”

“It happened to my uncle. In an urn, at least Ate Katrina stays home.”

When the owner of Alpha-Global was convicted, Stella waited for Katrina to contact her. She made sure her social media profiles were public, and she regularly searched for “Katrina Langitan.”

“It’s rough, Stella, we came here for a vacation, then suddenly there’s news about your sister. Isn’t she supposed to be teaching in Texas?”

“That’s what we thought. It took a long time and a lot of debt to get her



papers done. We never heard from her since. Our parents thought she hated us, wanted an escape, but I know she didn't."

"I'm sorry, babe. I know she's why you wanted to do your master's in the States. You loved her so much."

"One of the only people to understand who I really am," she agreed.

It had been daunting to realize that the United States was massive. Stella had arrived in New York for her master's in an arts university weeks ahead of her semester. Her official reason to the embassy, university board, and scholarship council was the need for a long enough period to familiarize herself in a new country—a partial truth, because she'd spent the time reaching out to the lawyers and teachers involved in filing the case. She never found a lead; they had never met any Katrina Langitan. There was another recruitment agency with the same modus and same conviction, but the result was the same for Stella.

"Yeah, even your parents didn't until a few years ago, right? Did they or the mortician say how she—?"

"I don't know." She twisted the bottle cap open and took a pill between her index finger and thumb, the same hand with her ring. "I couldn't read everything in the papers the manager showed me, couldn't remember everything he said. I'm just so exhausted."

"You should rest, babe. But check the certificate tomorrow. For your peace of mind."

She turned her head to her right, but only his crossed ankles and gray socks came into view. The price tag for the pair was twice the amount the funeraria charged her.

"Just keep in mind," she said, "that our house is really small. And don't wear your loafers tomorrow. It's always muddy, especially now that it's the rainy season."

"Don't worry, I know. Your house isn't grand. It's fine. I can't wait to meet your parents."

Stella let out a chuckle, the first today. "It's much, much worse than that. It's in Sitio Batong Ipot. Bato means rock and ipot means bird shit. It's as bad as it sounds."

"Oh, gross."

"Yep."

"How on earth did that place get that name?"

She shrugged, still looking at his expensive socks. The ring was uncomfortable around her finger.

“Whatever, can’t be worse than the barracks. Which reminds me, you didn’t tell me a beach nearby is part of a military base. You chose this resort as a surprise, didn’t you?”

During the three-hour taxi ride from the airport this morning, Stella had to frantically look up the nearest resort to Mayabo with available rooms on such short notice while Aaron snored on her shoulder. She couldn’t imagine his hulking body on the bamboo bed back home, the one she’d shared with her parents and sister.

“Yeah, we call it mini Boracay.”

“Like the place we were supposed to go to.”

“Boracay de Cavite to make it sound fancier. I haven’t actually been there. I just know there’s a school for training marines.”

“The guy downstairs said I’d be able to see the island of Corregidor from there.”

“Hmm-mm. Yeah.”

“I read about it in one of my sources for thesis, in the footnotes. It was used in the Second World War, did you know? Seeing it will be a historic moment. Can we go to this mini Boar-kaye—”

“Bo-ra-cay,” she corrected, enunciating each syllable like the Filipino she was, and put the pill under her tongue. She fiddled with her ring again.

“Babe, I’m still busy learning your last name. Lung-gee-ten. I’m so close!”

“La-ngi-tan.”

“Yeah, I’ll get there. So, this marines beach, let’s go after the wake, yeah? Who knows, maybe I’ll meet the recruits. Did I mention I was in GTMO for a few years? Early 2000s. I can teach the locals all the things you should do to a communist. Learn from the master, know what I’m saying?”

She didn’t know what to say. She continued to play with the ring, dragging it over her knuckles then back in place.

“Duterte can hire me like a visiting professor, but for joint exercises.”

Here, it could never be anything else but a ring.

Today, Katrina decided to postpone checking her students’ exams for the next day. As soon as the last bell rang, she dismissed her class and made a beeline for the faculty room for her things. Her colleagues hadn’t arrived yet so no one delayed her early departure. Stella had told her she would be practicing for a group report until six so she’d be home late.

Juday was sweeping hair out to the street and noticed her from a distance. “Good afternoon, Katinkina!” greeted Juday in a loud voice. “You’re out early! Not even five yet.”

When she was close enough, Katrina said, “Ah, well. I have something to tell you.”

With one last, vigorous shake of the broom, Juday gestured for them to get inside. “Tara.”

“How do I say it?” she said, sitting on the bench with Juday. “Hmm, well, my kapatid . . . you know, my brother, now my sister . . .”

“Ay, bakla!”

“I knew you’d be happy.”

“Finally, Stella is born!”

Katrina knitted her brow. “Stella?” she asked.

“Oo!” Juday clapped and grinned. “She was experimenting with Bituin, Tala, and Star, but I thought, how baduy! Everyone has always claimed to be a star: Mega Star, The Star for All Seasons, Diamond Star. Laos na! Call yourself Stella, I told her. Katrina and Stella, they rhyme a bit, right? Katrina and Stella, sisterettes!” She met Katrina with a stare. “What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you don’t accept her? D’yos ko, don’t you even! We’ve been friends for so long—“

“No, it’s not that! Ano ka ba! It’s not a matter of accepting her, Stella . . . oh, I like that new name for her. Like sisterettes, you’re right.”

“I always knew Stella’s one of us. Call it lukso ng dugo. She’s my junakis.” Juday laughed. “The truth is, I gave birth to her talaga, not your nanay. Charing!”

Katrina couldn’t help but laugh as well. “Sure, sure, you’re her mader-maderan. You helped give birth to this new her. But, like I said, it’s not about acceptance. She also wants to take up fine arts in college. It’s expensive, but I told her to go for it. She’s so dear to me, my sister; mahal na mahal ko s’ya. I want her to have an easy life, do you get me? A life as the woman she wants to be when she grows up.”

“You’re worried for her.”

“Yes. I know it will be hard for her. I see how hard it is for you.”

“She’ll survive. You know how masungit she can be.”

“Almost maldita, right? But I don’t want her to have to survive. I want to give her a life without needing to survive—without compromise. ‘Yong she won’t feel controlled by utang na loob.”

“Bakla, that’s some artistahin speech. Pang-FAMAS na you.”

“FAMAS lang?”

“Yes, bakla, if you want Oscar’s you better work on your makeup and your fashion, medyo chaka kasi.”

“Love and war, two things that can really get a man going. Wish I got to join the visiting troops back then, I could’ve met you sooner.”

“I doubt it,” said Stella. “Subic—” She closed her eyes. She wanted to succumb to fatigue and escape all the thoughts running around in her head.

When Aaron had asked her out at the end of the first semester, she questioned him, “Are you a sort of—are you . . . gay?” It embarrassed her when he laughed, until he answered, “No, I like women. Beautiful, smart, exotic women, like you.” She had clung to his affirmation and ignored everything else, even her own pledge against utang na loob. He was the same man now as he had been then, a veteran seven years older, much taller, with gorgeous green eyes, light-brown hair, and skin paler than hers. It was an all-too-familiar image, one that she believed—convinced herself, desperately hoped even, over the years—she was exempted from. If she had not met Aaron in a prestigious university in America and instead sooner, here in the Philippines . . .

“Subic,” she repeated, her throat tightening, “is really far from here.”

And if her sister had really been a communist, a prostitute, or a drug addict. . . . She opened her eyes to darkness. The dama de noche, she thought. It would be blooming outside the funeraria, its scent inescapable and haunting. The ring slipped from her hold. It bounced on the floor once, between her feet, before it rolled under the bed. Its clatter and clink reverberated in her ears, each iteration louder than the last, until it drowned her boyfriend’s memories of the good ol’ military days, drowned her own thoughts; there was only a deafening clamor inside her head. When it dissipated, there was clarity.

The glow of the bedside lamps cast Aaron’s pale silhouette on the glass windows in front of her. He was still talking.

“—who they are, none of it matters when you’re out there, it’s you or them—”

“None of it matters,” she echoed.

“Exactly.”

“Who she was, none of it should have mattered.”