

Abstract

This story follows sixteen-year-old Helen after her family's sudden move from Tuguegarao to Cagayan de Oro. Her brother Jimmy runs away from their new home but often visits Helen at school. Helen struggles to balance duties for her parents, the social score with her new friend Bonnie, and her tough love for her brother, and the story explores the lengths one sibling will go to protect or chastise another.

Keywords

internal migration
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coming-of-age
family

I'M GROWING UP

NH LEGASPI

HELEN SURPRISED HERSELF with how comfortable she now was at this new school. Just a few months earlier, she would prattle off a laundry list of things that annoyed her about being in this provincial town, but now she looked forward to leaving the empty shell of their new house to sit in class and daydream while her teachers droned and her classmates chitchatted in the background. If she said this loud enough for her father to hear, he would then correct her and say that the city they moved to, in fact, is a chartered city; it became one decades ago. Even their hometown of Tuguegarao wasn't one yet, so now that they were here it was time to stop calling Cagayan de Oro *probinsiya*; her father's old friends had told him that after years of being asked if they rode carabaos to school or had RTWs in the city after long having taxicabs and malls, Kagay-anons would raise eyebrows or fists over this slightest error.

Filipino class, which was the only subject Helen didn't struggle with, was her favorite time to tune out her inconvenient responsibilities. She

knew that if she reread the textbook later, she'd still be able to do her assignments and help her new friend Bonnie even without listening to the discussion. Her new school was within the city proper, so there was always a medley of noises from *motorelas* and jeepneys pattering along the nearby blocks and much to look at. Out of the window, she could see the street corners leading to the city hall to the left and Plaza Divisoria to the right, and a little beyond that, the glistening Cagayan River. They also had a Cagayan River in Tuguegarao, and instead of feeling homesick, Helen now felt amused by the coincidence. Helen looked down at the street again. A familiar figure with curly hair and bad posture was walking toward the school gate: her older brother Jimmy. He stopped on the street just across from her school building, sat down on the sidewalk, and lit a cigarette. Helen continued to watch him, and maybe because of the intensity of her gaze, or that awareness only siblings can have for each other, Jimmy looked up and spotted her scowling at him. He put two fingers together in a mock salute and waved his fingers at her, smiling like a guilty child.

Helen's gaze snapped back to her teacher, who was still going on about their latest Sulating Pangwakas assignment. She would have to make an excuse for going home early to Bonnie, who would want her to explain the assignment. She looked behind her at the large clock at the back of the classroom. There were thirty minutes to go before they were dismissed, and she didn't want to look out the window anymore, so she trained her eyes back at her teacher with the frown still across her face.

That windy early morning in May, when they first stepped off the ferry at the Cagayan de Oro pier, now seemed like a faraway dream. Jimmy was silent the entire three-day trip, and Tatay spoke to Helen and Nanay without once looking at him. Not knowing what else to do, Helen only spoke when her parents asked her things, like where she packed the snacks or if she needed to go to the toilet.

The drive to their new home in the PU Minica they took from the pier was just as silent, punctuated only when Tatay, who grew up in Bohol and could speak Binisaya, conversed with the driver about this or that landmark they passed. They drove west via the national highway, past

a soft drink plant, a shopping mall, gas stations, and swathes of empty space. They turned toward an inner road and drove further past a rice plant, a military camp, more empty space, before finally turning at an uphill road beside a regional government office.

They reached a corner house, where a man was waving at them to indicate that the cab had to stop near that spot. Tatay got out and shook hands with his old friend from high school, who helped make arrangements for the house. They were in a subdivision called Bluebell, and the house was a bungalow with unpainted tin roofing. It was fenced with concrete blocks topped with shards from glass bottles for added security—and much smaller than the two-story ancestral house they had in Tuguegarao, which they shared with relatives and from where they ran Nanay's *karinderya*. They unloaded their bags from the car and stepped into their new home, and just as Helen was about to lie down and rest from all the traveling, Nanay announced that she and Tatay were stepping out to go to the market.

"Helen, you know how I like the kitchen arranged, could you please help me unpack these, dear? Jimmy, put these away. Your room is down the corridor." Nanay kissed Helen and Jimmy on the tops of their heads before heading out with Tatay, who was waiting in the same PU they hired. Helen thought she misheard Nanay when she said *your room*—singular—to the both of them. To confirm this, Helen sped down the short corridor, and Jimmy followed.

The room Nanay said was theirs had a bunk bed and a large closet with a mirror. The single window faced the street, unlike their parents', which faced the backyard.

Jimmy's face looked like he'd stepped on carabao dung. "Are they serious?"

Helen hadn't spoken to him during the whole trip, knowing their parents were watching, so her voice cracked a little. "Isn't it obvious? They want me to babysit you. If you'd only get it together, we wouldn't be here."

"Gosh, not you, too. How many times do I have to tell all of you that I didn't do anything? I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Well, all this," Helen gestured around them, "must mean there's something you're not telling me." She held her gaze at her older brother, as if challenging him.

Jimmy glared back. With hurt in his voice caused by maybe more than just being silent for days, he said, "As if you don't know what Tatay is like."

He was silent for a moment and then picked up his bags again. “Gamma Rho has a chapter here, I think. I’ll see who I can crash with.” He made his way back to the kitchen, then he paused. “They still give you allowance, right? I just need enough for jeepney fare.”

Like in all instances Jimmy had asked her for favors, Helen made a mental rundown of what would happen if she chose not to give him the money. He would have to walk, beg, or worse, get picked up by the police. Or he would get lost and not know how to find his way back without transportation. He would starve. Then he would die. That was fine, considering Helen had to leave her friends behind just because of him. But then she realized that if he did get caught, their parents wouldn’t know how to get him out of it anymore. This wasn’t Tuguegarao, where Nanay grew up with the local army general’s sister. He would get thrown in jail or, worse, tortured, the way she used to hear Nanay and Tatay speak in hushed tones about the people they knew back home even after martial law was declared over. Then her parents would be devastated, and it would be her fault. So she opened the empty needle book where she kept her savings and took out a five-peso bill.

Jimmy’s face brightened when Helen handed him the money. “You’re the best, Nellie,” he said and rested his hand on the top of her head. “Don’t tell them you saw me leave. I don’t want you getting in trouble for my sake.” He rubbed his palm on her head to mess up her hair, and Helen slapped his hand away.

“Too late for that now, don’t you think?”

Jimmy mock-saluted and winked at her from behind the gate he had just latched shut.

Helen had no qualms about being on her own. It was much more peaceful without her parents badgering her to help more and look after her older brother in the same breath while they themselves were always away. Helen unpacked their old stereo and turned the FM knob to the first notes of pop music she could hear. The song playing was the tail end of “I’m Growing Up,” and she remembered watching TV at home with their grandmother in Tuguegarao and seeing Gary V perform this on *Penthouse Live* with Pops and Martin hosting the show, both elegant and dashing, the perfect couple. As she started unpacking their things in the living room, Helen wondered when she might ever get a Martin of her own; in Tuguegarao, she had only gotten almost close to it.

Jimmy was three years and ten months older than Helen, but ever since she found dark blood in her underwear, she suddenly had so much more responsibilities than he ever did when he was her age. She washed clothes, helped with the *karinderya*, cleaned the house, mended curtains and tablecloths for Nanay, and was only allowed to go out when her chores were finished—and still had to come home hours before Jimmy did.

Helen was a baby when Marcos appeared on TV and caused terror throughout the country. Jimmy and Helen grew up together, mostly indoors, and when martial law ended on paper just after her thirteenth birthday, nothing much in her home life changed. She still had to cook with Nanay. She still had to mend clothes. She still didn't get to spend time with her friends, and she still couldn't get that second anthem they sang at flag ceremony out of her head.

But Jimmy's life began when he finished high school. Helen watched him do push-ups and stare at himself in the mirror as he tried Gary V's dance moves and grew out his hair to look like a matinee idol. Jimmy said he wanted to be a singer, but Tatay said he should be an engineer just like him, and that was that. Parties were allowed by then, and Jimmy snuck out, night after night. To evade a scolding from their parents, he snuck back in by waking up Helen and asking her to open the door for him. It would be a gentle tap on her bedroom window followed by a strong whisper of "Nellie," a nickname that stuck from his first drunken homecoming when he slurred her name in an attempt at hippie slang. He would always reek of smokes and beer when he came into the house, and Helen would only sigh as she watched him waddle to his bed and then go back to sleep.

One night Jimmy came home with a thick jacket on, sweating all over and with a limp, and Helen helped him get into bed. When Helen said she would call their parents, he said there was no need; he was just tired, that's all. In the morning Nanay came into his room to set down his ironed clothes and saw the bruises on his shirtless body.

At dinnertime that night, Tatay made Jimmy stand up against the wall. "If you wanted to get a beating so bad, you should have just come to me," he spat. Tatay grabbed Jimmy by the collar. "Look at me. Just what do you plan on doing with your life, boy?"

Just as Jimmy was finishing his second year of college, news broke out of a fraternity hazing ritual gone wrong, and the group implicated in the crime was Gamma Rho. Despite Jimmy's insistence that he wasn't

involved because he arrived late and even helped call the ambulance, Tatay announced that that was it—they were moving.

“It’s all right, dear,” Nanay later said to Jimmy, who was face down on his bed. Helen was watching from the doorway. “Your Tatay’s been looking for more projects, so we were bound to move anyway. You just helped his decision along.”

When Nanay and Tatay came back from the market, all they could talk about was Jimmy and not the organized kitchen or the neatly arranged living room. As promised, Helen lied and said she was fixing up her bedroom and didn’t hear him open the gate.

“What were you fixing that was so important? We’re in a new place, God knows what could happen to that boy,” Tatay said. “This isn’t Tuguegarao anymore, don’t you understand?”

Hoping to diffuse Tatay’s emotions, Nanay spoke to Helen. “The evening caught up to us because we passed by your new school, dear. We’ve settled everything. You just have to come a little earlier on your first day and get fitted for your uniform. It’s only one ride away from here, I’ll teach you which jeepney to take,” she smiled. “New school, new friends, isn’t this exciting?”

Helen tried to smile back and helped set out dinner.

That night, she went to her and Jimmy’s room, quite glad to be alone. She’d unpacked every bag except hers. She stored her clothes by color and type in the closet, with the best ones at the top of the stack. As she was folding her most flattering striped long-sleeved polo shirt, which she fully planned on wearing to her first day of school while her uniform was still being made, she noticed a long slit on the forearm of one sleeve; a noticeable one. She sighed. She must have torn it when she yanked all her clothes from the metal wire clothesline they had in Tuguegarao. She’d had to pack in a rush because they were leaving the next day and she was out all afternoon sobbing with her friends, who gave her small trinkets from their own collections as going-away presents.

This shirt was the closest she could get to looking preppy chic, and now it was ruined. She thought she might even cry, but she knew she had spent all her tears back home. Instead, she took out a large red utility box

from her duffel bag and opened it to reveal three layers of neatly arranged sewing tools. They had to leave her grandmother's sewing machine at their old house, a waste considering how Helen could have used it more here, but Lola gladly allowed her to bring this prized sewing kit. Now she picked up a pair of scissors and some chalk, chose the closest matching thread color, and got to work.

As Tatay exhausted all his old contacts to land a new project in the city, Nanay had to re-establish herself. The karinderya in Tuguegarao was a small space where people could sit, and all the good dishes would be sold or reserved before lunchtime even began. Here in the new city, she had to be more mobile and visible to get a new set of customers. She decided against putting up shop and instead placed cooked lunches in clear plastic bags and sold them in the government office nearby. When she ran out of lunch packs, she went to the city to sell snacks in other government offices. While in Tuguegarao Nanay used to enlist relatives to help her in preparing the food, now only Helen could assist her. They woke up at dawn, and Helen fought back sleep as she chopped and diced and sauteed, then crawled back to her room once her tasks were done. It would have been so much easier if Jimmy was there to help and not frolicking around the city while Helen was left to mince garlic, the smell of which would stay under her fingernails all day. Jimmy's departure caused a gloom that hung throughout the house, especially when Tatay was around. Helen was careful not to mention seeing her brother, but sometimes the weight of the things she knew caught up to her and loomed over her so much that it made her head ache.

On the very first day of school, her classmates spoke to her in rapid, clattering Binisaya, and she was appalled that they even assumed she could understand them. When she replied in Tagalog, the most neutral she could go since she knew no one would understand a word of her patchy Ibanag, her classmates backed away and only spoke directly to her at Filipino class, where their teacher would enforce a Filipino-speaking-only rule.

Drowsy from helping Nanay so early in the morning even when she got to take a snooze on the jeepney to school, she wondered why her classmates

scratched their heads during math class and mumbled something about being horny. Later she learned that they were only confused, just as she was, now that she learned that the word *libog* here didn't mean at all the same in Binisaya as it did in Tagalog.

At lunchtime, Helen chose the first empty table she could find. She took out her off-brand plastic lunch container and started eating the *menudo* she'd helped Nanay prepare that morning. The students were mostly in uniform, a flashy combination of white and pink for the girls and white and khaki for the boys. The girls had another set of uniforms, all-white dresses with thin blue ribbons tied under the large flat collar, for special occasions. Helen already knew these would be a nightmare to keep bright and white, especially on period days. Her thoughts were interrupted by a group of girls approaching the table where she was sitting. At the front of the group was a tall girl who fit well in her uniform, her permed hair in a side-ponytail like Madonna's.

"You're the new student?" she said to Helen, who was wearing her repaired striped polo shirt, now short-sleeved. She spoke in Tagalog.

Helen nodded and hoped the muscles she forced on her face produced a smile.

"You don't understand any Bisaya?"

Helen shook her head.

The girl and her clique of two sat with Helen at the table. "I'm Bonnie, Velez."

Helen swallowed hard before replying. "Helen Collado."

"Gosh, even her name sounds classy," Bonnie said in English to the other girls, who giggled. "You're from Manila, right? I've only been there twice. The shopping there is amazing, right? Your top, did you get it from Ali Mall?"

Helen had been to Manila exactly twice: when Tatay took them to Aristocrat for Jimmy's high school graduation and when they boarded the boat to Cebu on the way here.

"Yeah," Helen lied. The top was from an RTW store in Tuguegarao.

"I wish I lived there, it would be so fun. But I'm really no good at Tagalog," Bonnie sighed. "Filipino class is the only thing holding back my grades," she said, pouting and looking straight at Helen through her eyelashes.

"She's at the top of the class," one of the girls said to Helen. "She'll be valedictorian, and then she'll get to study in UP."

“And I’m so glad I’ll get to practice, now that you’re here,” Bonnie said with a giggle. “And did I mention how pretty you are? You look a bit like Sharon.”

The actress Sharon Cuneta was the last person Helen wanted to be told she looked like, but somehow it made her agree to help Bonnie write her Sulating Pangwakas assignments and other Filipino homework. As soon as she got her new uniform, she was in sync with Bonnie and her crew, tutoring her at lunchtime and over the phone on weeknights before assignments were due. This was better than nothing, Helen thought. At least there was a place for her here.

Rushing outside after class, Helen saw a disheveled Jimmy craning his neck to find her among the sea of students exiting the school gate. He looked like he hadn’t taken a bath in days. She took his arm and steered him away from the front of the gate.

“You should have gone to the house, I don’t have money with me now,” Helen hissed.

“You’re too much. What if I just wanted to see you?” Jimmy said with a grin.

“You stink and you had to wait for me, of course I know you need money.”

“I just need a little to chip in for the bills,” Jimmy replied. “I’m staying with other Gamma brods at this little pad, and our electricity and water got cut.”

“You know where you don’t need to worry about electricity and water?” Helen snapped. “Our house. It’s empty now, I’m sure Tatay and Nanay won’t be home till dinner.” All the same, Helen rummaged through her bag to get some peso bills and her extra house key.

Jimmy only scoffed. “I’m not going back there.”

Helen looked up at him. “You’d rather stay in that dingy pad?”

“Yeah, they’re my friends, practically family now. Thanks to them I kind of understand the language now, you know? Can barely speak it, but at least I get it. Living here in this probinsiya isn’t that bad after all.” Jimmy stubbed out the cigarette he was holding. “The only hassle is having to deal with those Beta Phi goons. They’ve been eyeing me at the pool hall lately, the assholes. If they so much as wink in my direction, I’d love for things to get ugly.”

"I'd love for you to get it together." Helen pressed a five-peso bill and some coins in his hand. "Stay out of trouble, will you?"

"Oh, Nellie," Jimmy said. "You know it's trouble that always comes for me, right?" He chuckled and reached up to ruffle her hair, but Helen was quicker to evade him and slap his hand away. He pointed his finger at her, as if to say *you got me there*, and mock-saluted at her before he walked away.

Helen turned to the direction of her jeepney terminal and saw that Bonnie and her two friends were coming toward her.

"Who was that?" Bonnie asked. "A college boy?"

Helen shook her head. "No one."

Bonnie shot a knowing look at her two minions and back at her and then said with a smirk, "We didn't know you had a boyfriend."

If Helen wasn't trying to get them to like her, she would have vomited on the three of them.

"No, he's . . . my neighbor. He was asking me if my Nanay was accepting work at—"

"Okay, okay, we believe you," Bonnie said. "He looked too old for you anyway. Should we get a soda before going home?"

Helen only had enough change for jeepney fare now, much less a soda, but she said yes, always yes to anything other than the labor and silence waiting for her at home.

Back in Tuguegarao, a week before they had to move, Helen had finally nagged Jimmy enough for him to take her to one of the parties he always went to. In exchange, Helen wouldn't tell their parents that he asked for her help in stealing beers from Tatay's supply. Jimmy was annoyed and jumpy about it, but he agreed anyway. Helen told their parents she would be staying overnight at her friend's house to work on a project, and then she snuck out to meet Jimmy.

Helen expected they would be going to a dance club, or a concert, but instead he took her to a house in Tanza with a large lawn, where disco music was blasting from large speakers stacked on the grass. Before waving at people in the distance and disappearing into the crowd with the beers in hand, Jimmy quickly yelled into Helen's ear: "Don't take anything other than water, and make sure you pour it yourself and taste a bit of it

first, and—hey, Nellie, listen!—definitely don't smoke anything, OK? I'll come back for you."

Helen stood on the fringes of the crowd and observed, with curious glee, the things older teenagers did. The movies exaggerated it a little. There were no couples making out in plain sight, but there were some behind the bushes and others discreetly petting each other, confident that no one was watching in the haze of the music and smoke coming from all directions. Helen knew these smells from the time Jimmy thought it would be fun to have her try a smoke and a joint two nights in a row. The experience only taught her that she didn't like smoking at all.

The smoke was drying up her throat, and she felt confident enough to trace the edges of the crowd toward a long catering table, where she saw the food and drinks laid out—mostly junk food, soda mixes, and questionable desserts. A large cooler filled with ice from narrow plastic bags and piles of amber beer bottles were under the table. There were bottles with clear liquid inside, but she knew better than to pour from those. There was a small bathroom with a line forming outside but no sink around where she could get herself some tap water. For how underaged she was, no one batted an eye as she walked around the party, and no one spoke to her. Was she acceptable, or was she invisible?

Helen was too shy to speak to anyone, so the only recourse was to make her way up to the dark main house and get water from their refrigerator. She assumed it was empty or off-limits, seeing as no one was entering. But she also knew all houses had some source of water, and she needed it now. She went up the uneven concrete steps that led to the back of the house and, with the expertise she gained from sneaking Jimmy into their house past midnight, made nearly no sound as she entered the door. The music outside became muffled down. The refrigerator was right next to the door, and she opened it to find that it was full of more beer and liquor, and the freezer was full of plastic soda bags with ice. She scanned the kitchen and found a clean plastic cup. She made her way to the kitchen sink and opened the faucet just enough to get a thin, soundless stream of water going. She wanted to get a good drink and then fill it up so she didn't need to come back. As she gulped down her first fill and turned the faucet on again, she heard a crack, followed by a loud thud, in one of the rooms.

Helen turned to leave, but stopped when she heard a commanding voice coming from the same room. It sounded like Jimmy's.

It was clear she didn't need to creep toward the room and see if she was right. She knew it would have been best not to pursue the sinking feeling in her stomach, the way she always sensed Jimmy was doing more than parties at night. But as she tiptoed and crouched by the entrance of another room across from it, and even before she could see more clearly amid all the smoke coming out of the door that was opened just a crack, she knew it was him. Jimmy was sitting with his legs crossed, smoking a cigarette, and watching a bruised, sweaty, shaking, blindfolded boy in his underwear get hit by a grinning fully clothed boy holding a heavy wooden paddle. The blindfolded boy fell to the ground. Jimmy leaned forward and told him to get up. When he didn't, the boy who struck him nudged him with a foot. He didn't stir. They shook him, and he slumped face up, unmoving. Other clothed boys in the room crowded around the boy on the floor and tried to get him to sit up, calling him every name except his own. The boy on the floor stayed splayed there, and the boys above him looked at each other in silence.

Helen slipped out of the house and ran quickly into the lawn, where everything was as it was. There was still the disco music, the drinks on the table, and no drinking water in sight, the junk food now nearly gone. No one was watching her. No one could see her. She walked and walked until she found a pedicab that would take her home. In the morning, she would tell Jimmy she got bored and went home almost immediately after they arrived at the party.

"Any news of your son?" Tatay huffed as soon as he arrived home. It had been five months since Jimmy left, and this was the first time he'd ever mentioned him outright.

Nanay sighed and shook her head. "I leave the gate unlocked when we sleep, just in case."

Tatay scoffed. "We're compromising our safety just for him?" Helen and Nanay waited for him to command the gate to be padlocked, but Tatay kept speaking. "Let that kid rot wherever he is. If he doesn't come back by Christmas, we'll know he's made his decision."

Nanay thought for a moment as she took out plates to set on the table. "Helen, dear, any word from your brother? I know you kids are close, has he left you any messages?" she said.

Helen looked at both her parents and hoped her breathing hadn't changed. Jimmy had been waiting for her at the school gate more often, and because she couldn't bear how awful he looked, she would throw in some shampoo, soap, or small towels to the bills and coins he always asked from her. But she didn't see him today, so she shook her head.

"This wouldn't have happened if you'd kept an eye on him more," Tatay said to Nanay.

Nanay set down the utensils with a clatter and put her hands on her hips. "You know I barely get any sleep making these lunch packs I sell, which, if you remember, get us by now while you still haven't gotten any projects."

"Are you saying I'm inadequate?" Tatay slammed his suitcase on the table. "That's why we're here, I'm doing everything I can."

Helen sank into a chair. She had heard this so many times. She wished for something, anything to happen, an earthquake, a thunderstorm, anything to stop this from going where she was sure it would. She decided then and there that she would never stay here, never settle down here, never make a life in a place like this, a frail substitute of what her life could have been if she just stayed where she was.

Nanay's voice was breaking. "We left our whole lives behind just so you could prove something to yourself, we left because you didn't know what to do with yourself. That's why you put our children through this, and look what's happening. Your son doesn't want to live with us, and your daughter is practically mute around us. So don't tell me I wasn't taking care of our children when you're clearly only out dr—"

The phone rang. Helen shot up from her chair.

"If it's your brother, tell him we want to speak to him," Tatay snapped.

Helen thanked the heavens and picked up the phone. It was Bonnie. She motioned to her parents that the call was for her. She stretched the telephone cord as far as it could go so that she was just out of earshot.

"So it's my birthday this weekend," Helen heard Bonnie say. "I'll be having a disco party. Have you been to one? It's going to be so much fun. You'll come, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, sure," Helen breathed into the receiver. "I'd be glad to."

Bonnie giggled. "I'll be having some friends from Xavier come over, too. Maybe we can finally get you a real boyfriend."

Helen's heart surged. Things were finally happening for her. She was in.

“Great! See you then,” Helen said, keeping herself from screaming.

“Sweet! I’m so excited to see what you’ll be wearing, I’m sure it will be super chic,” Bonnie said before they hung up.

Helen let out a little squeal before she turned back to the dinner table where her parents still stood. Her face was somber again to match her parents’ dour expressions.

Helen’s joy quickly turned into anxiety at the thought that she had nothing to wear to the party. All through dinnertime and cleaning up, her mind swirled with the possibilities, what she could and couldn’t wear: She looked pitiful in drop-waisted dresses, was not busty enough for a bubble dress, didn’t have the right hair for a modern Victorian-style outfit. But reality dawned on her when she realized there would be no chance her parents would let her buy a new dress for a party, and her savings were dwindling from the dole-outs she’d been giving Jimmy. If only she could go to the mall, the one they passed by on their first day in this city, and look at her options. If only she could go shopping and not think of how to afford the dresses on display.

Helen lay awake in bed, thinking of what she could possibly put together to make her not just Bonnie’s Tagalog tutor but a true member of her clique. Things were finally looking up for her, this was her chance, and she had to make it count. She got up from her bed, opened the doors of her cabinet, and rummaged for anything she could possibly use for the party. There were some pairs of pantyhose, an old pair of white heeled sandals, chunky plastic earrings, and bracelets from her old friends. There had to be *something* she could wear. She unearthed an old but still usable baby blue satin slip dress that had a deep neckline and spaghetti straps, a gift from one of her aunts, but it looked too plain for the event she was invited to. She spotted her sewing kit. She dug into its largest compartment and found a small bag of white bugle beads.

With her materials laid out on her bed, and the sewing kit on the floor, Helen carefully began applying the beads. She had enough to line the straps and neckline with them, just to give it a classier look. She would do her hair and makeup like Pops on *Penthouse Live* and finally get to use Nanay’s dark eyeshadows.

Lost in her work, unaware of how late at night it was, Helen almost didn’t hear him. The faint sound coming from outside the window sounded like Jimmy but much more hushed, much weaker, that she

missed it. Then she heard it again, even softer now, “Nel—”

“Kuya?” She whispered back into the darkness.

“Open up, will you?”

Helen crept to their front door and opened it gently, only for Jimmy to burst in, heavy and drenched in the dark, and walk right past her. Jimmy headed to their room, walking with his head tilted to the right side, like the drunken undead. Helen glanced at the door of their parents’ bedroom at the far end of their living room and moved closer to hear if they were stirring from the commotion. Hearing nothing, she locked their front door and went to her and Jimmy’s room.

Jimmy was sprawled on the bottom bunk, the dress Helen was working on underneath him, sewing kit contents strewn on the floor. The left side of his head was caked with blood.

Helen’s first impulse was to call her parents right away, but she knew what would happen. They would scream in alarm. They would call an ambulance. They would send Jimmy away, or worse, the whole family would move all over again. Start over, again. Helen knew she didn’t want to spend the rest of her life in this city, but for now all she wanted was to go to a party for people her age, to have fun and drink punch and talk to boys and maybe even get to kiss one and not have to stumble upon horrible things and never speak of them.

Jimmy was breathing, Helen at least knew that. She stood there, staring at her brother, taking in the changes that five months of being away had done to him: He was thinner now, and his curly hair, better than she could ever achieve with rollers and hair products, was longer and getting into his eyes. There was no distress in his face, despite the blood all over the side of his head, ear, and neck. Helen watched him breathe a second more and realized what she needed to do.

Helen put warm water from their thermos in a small basin and got a clean face towel from their closet. She yanked away the baby blue slip dress from underneath her brother’s sleeping body and left it coiled on the floor with her sewing materials. She spoke to Jimmy, checking if he was still conscious. He grunted back when she asked her where he’d come from, who did this to him. Helen half-expected his ear to have gotten torn off, but as she wiped away the hardened blood, she found that his ear was intact. Under his curls, on the side of his head, was a deep gash, glistening with blood thicker than Helen had ever seen. Helen cleaned the surrounding area as best as she could, recalling from home economics

classes never to touch an open wound directly. Jimmy sighed, and for a second, Helen thought she heard him say, “Sorry, Nellie.”

There was love there, somehow, maybe some forgiveness. As Helen wrung the face towel on the basin, the water started to darken. She checked if he had a fever, or was getting chills, but her brother looked serene and unbothered.

She sat on the corner of the bed, staring at the bedroom door, thinking it would be far too easy to burst into their parents’ room and tell them what happened. What of the consequences that might follow? Her eyes landed on the ruined dress, the opened utility box, the needles and threads of assorted thickness. She was always good at mending things. How was now so different? She hung up the dress and replaced the contents of the sewing kit but took out her longest needle, an old lighter, and her thickest thread. Gently she approached him, her hands shaking, ready to at least try what she knew needed to be done. If she did this right, they could pretend, like with so many other things, like none of this ever happened.