

Rehearsing Life

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I PUSHED MYSELF up to sit on the cot at the foot of Chet's bed. I rubbed my eyes, just to be sure I hadn't missed anything, but no, Chet hadn't moved. His chest still rose in time with the ventilator; his fingers still curled in a half-hearted fist; his hands still restrained for fear that in his sleep, he might just grab and fling away his oxygen mask. If he had awakened while I slept and tried to call me, he would have made no sound—a breathing tube in his throat bypassed his vocal chords. But no, he hadn't stirred. Nothing had changed. Everything was as it had been five hours before when I nodded off to sleep.

On the bed stand, next to the boxes of paper towels, disposable gloves, disposable masks, syringes and spare tubing, there was still one unopened packet of crackers. My stomach growled in response to that visual stimuli. It was nearly 5 a.m. If I were home, I'd be having my breakfast at this time, or coffee, at the very least.

The breakfast tray hadn't been delivered yet, and Juni was late again. He was supposed to stop by today on his way home from work. He was going to keep watch for an hour or two while I made my breakfast and took a shower at his apartment nearby. It was my only break. Yesterday, Juni had arrived on time; bleary eyed, but on time. I had left to have my breakfast and take my shower. Well, okay, so I may have picked up Juni's clothes from the floor and ran a load of laundry, I washed

dishes and dusted his apartment a bit. When I came back, there he was, curled up on the cot, snoring, instead of keeping watch over Chet like he was supposed to. I shouldn't be so hard on Juni. There was nothing to do here except watch cable TV. I hadn't planned on sleeping, either. At midnight, I had made my usual payment at the Accounting Office and came back. I lay down just to stretch my back but I woke up five hours later.

I don't know why Juni should work at a call center. Call center hours are a killer; they messed with his sense of time. He had told me he was saving up to go on a yearlong backpacking tour of Europe. I'd be glad if Juni arrived at all today, even if he was late, as long as he hadn't fallen off the bus or the train or stabbed by some hold-upper.

I stood up and stroked the lumps at the end of the bed that were Chet's feet. I wormed my hand under the sheets, and Chet's feet were cold. I took a pair of his socks from my purse and put them on him before I tucked the sheet back under his feet. The nurses kept the thermostat low so the machines wouldn't malfunction.

I took my phone out and pressed Karen's number on speed dial, but I hung up before it rang. Karen was probably getting her kids ready for school. She was supposed to come by on her way home from the office last night, so I could go to the supermarket, buy stuff to make adobo or menudo to keep in Juni's refrigerator for reheating. But Karen had to do overtime work last night in exchange for taking half-day at work today. Karen promised to come at 10 a.m., and so did Juni. When they both get here, finally, we will all be together in one room, one happy family.

The little green dot on the heart monitor drew my eye. Its pulse and flicker across the screen calmed me. The sucking sound the ventilator bellows made as it rose and fell assured me. Chet looked like he was sound asleep. I sometimes watched his eyeballs to see if they moved rapidly; it meant he was dreaming. But they never moved—his lids weren't even fully shut. It seemed like he watched me with half-lidded eyes. I put my face up close to his. I felt his breath on my cheek. I wondered if he could see me. I read somewhere that if people didn't blink, their eyes would dry out. I should ask the resident if I needed to buy eye drops for Chet.

All the rooms on this wing circled around the nurses' station in the middle. A woman in a lab coat slid open the glass door into Chet's room. She smiled at me. I moved away from Chet's bed and stood next to the other sliding glass door that led to the balcony. There was a park bench for family to sit and wait out there. Only one visitor at a time was allowed in the room with the patient. I could wait in the balcony while the staff did their rounds, but I was curious. I stayed out of their way, though.

This was a teaching hospital, and the woman who had just come in didn't wear a blue scrub uniform so she wasn't a nurse. The residents the past two days were all male. My eyes moved to the name embroidered on her coat. It had "MD" on the end of it. Her ID showed her smiling face, her name, and her position in the hierarchy on the wing: resident. This woman couldn't have been older than my daughter Karen. She had a G-Shock on her wrist. She peeked at the screen of her iPhone in her front pocket when a notification came in but didn't take the phone out of her pocket to read the notification.

"Ma'am," she said with a singsong rise and fall of her tone. "Have you been informed?" she asked me as she took Chet's record from a hook at the foot of the bed.

"What, that Dr. Alcaraz is coming by at 10?"

She did not immediately reply. She stared at Chet's IV drip and scribbled on his record. While she adjusted the flow, she said, "Dr. Alcaraz wants the whole family present," she said.

"I've informed my children, too. They'll be here when Dr. Alcaraz comes," I said.

The resident noted Chet's vitals, inspected the breathing tube, the IV, the catheter bag under the bed. She palpated Chet's tummy. She took out a stethoscope and listened to Chet's chest. She made notes on her clipboard.

"Any change I should know about?"

"Um, Dr. Alcaraz will discuss things with you later."

I sighed. No one told me anything I needed to know. I was the patient's next of kin—I should be informed of his status. Maybe she wasn't sure that I was Chet's wife. I could, after all, be the private nurse, housekeeper, personal assistant, housemaid, or the mistress of the patient. Perhaps if I were better dressed, I'd get some answers. I ran my palms over my crumpled pants and patted down my hair.

She smiled at me and said, "Dr. Alcaraz will answer whatever questions the family may have." She said this without even looking at me. Her eyes were glued to her clipboard.

I took a deep breath and said, "Good. It's about time somebody did." I was Chet's immediate family, his next of kin. Ms. LabCoat had no right to put on airs. I let out a breath. She'd had what, ten? Maybe, twelve years of university studies? An undergraduate degree and a medical degree? I didn't really care if she had crammed a whole encyclopedia of information in her brain and her hands knew how to intubate and suture. Ms. LabCoat was just caring for people who could not take care of themselves, same as any housewife like me—and I was not always just a plain housewife, either.

I had been waiting for two days, and no one had told me anything I wanted to know: how much longer I'd have to wait until Chet woke up, how much longer before

I could sleep on my own bed again, when Chet could go home or when Chet could be transferred into a regular room. A regular room, even a private suite would cost less than what they charged me for this room in the ICU.

Besides, Pippi my shi tzu was due for her monthly trim and grooming, and her annual antirabies shot. The water bill needed to be paid, two days after that, the electric bill as well. I couldn't remember if I had unplugged the TV when I left. I needed to get back home.

Before Ms. LabCoat turned to leave, she stared at me and said, "You'll have time to ask questions. Dr. Alacaraz will see your husband last."

I met her stare. Ms. LabCoat paused after the word "husband"—that pause meant something. My mother had always said that for a girl to get ahead in this world, a girl must always be prepared. A girl needed tools in her purse, things like tweezers and a nail cutter. With the resident's stress on the word "husband," maybe I should have had my marriage certificate laminated and stashed in my purse as well.

The resident checked her watch again and smiled at me. "Doc's usually late. You still have time for breakfast." And then she turned around, slid the glass door open, and left.

I thumped my fist on Chet's bed. He didn't stir. The heart monitor still beeped in synch with the ventilator. What had Chet been thinking on Wednesday? Why did he go for lunch to the Army-Navy Club without taking his daily bronchodilator first? It was the height of summer, the heat index was fever-like at 41 degrees. Then it rained, and he could've sliced the humidity in the air. Of course, the heat would have triggered his asthma. He should have known that. The thick moist heat on wet concrete and the smell of trash in the bay would have made his nose itch and twitch—Chet should have known what that meant. His nose had always been his early warning device, the siren that signaled the predictable inflammation of his airways, when triggered.

In college, I had read an essay by Seneca who had asthma, too. He had referred to his asthma attacks as "rehearsing death," or something like that. Chet had not developed asthma until he was in college. He was luckier than Seneca who'd had asthma since childhood. Chet had been crazy for basketball when he was a child. If he'd had asthma then, he probably wouldn't have played basketball at all. Chet had what his doctor called adult-onset asthma. It began with allergies which made his nose sneezy and stuffy. He'd had his very first asthma attack was when he was reviewing for the bar exam. He thought it was an anxiety attack. Chet couldn't believe he had asthma.

Every morning since our wedding, I had sorted and packed pills in those little boxes with the words "breakfast," "lunch," and "dinner" Scotch-taped on the cover. I

had thought CPA-lawyers who knew to put things in neat boxes, rows, and columns would take to the rigor of taking maintenance medication. But, no. Through all the years of our marriage, Chet had come home from the office, sneezy and wheezy, and the pills still rattled in their plastic cages. I had thought the Chief Financial Officer of a Makati-based tax firm would live a well-ordered life if he wanted to keep on breathing.

Every morning when Chet had hugged me goodbye, I patted his front pants pocket to check for the metered-dose inhaler. He had one in his pocket, one in the glove compartment in his car, one in the console box, the back zip pocket of the passenger seat, and in his desk drawer at the office. I had even carried a metered-dose inhaler in my own purse for him, just in case.

Every morning, I had also patted his back pocket to see if he had his wallet. When we were newly married, I had patted something else, just for fun, but that had been a long time ago. Now, I slid my hand under the sheets and patted that something else, for old time's sake. No reaction.

Chet had been noncompliant with his medication, and the doctor had told me, "If you don't want to be a young widow, make sure he takes his meds." His blood pressure rose when he struggled to breathe. So, along with the job of wife, homemaker, housekeeper, mother-in-law-pleaser, and mother, I had also taken on that job of private nurse as well. No, the better word was "babysitter"—Chet was such a baby sometimes. He had been his mother's only child, and he had been sickly. My mother-in-law had doted on him, and she had made me promise to take care of Chet. My mother-in-law had asthma as well, and with her dying breath she had made me swear to take care of Chet and her teapot collection.

Hey, I led Chet to the water; I couldn't make him drink. The most dutiful wife could not have been expected to follow her husband around to make sure he stayed away from triggers. Every day, I sent him three text messages at 9:00 a.m., at 12:00 noon, and at 3:00 p.m. asking if he'd taken his medicines, and he had always replied: "Copy." There were times he had not replied to my text messages, and I had to call him. He ignored my call, of course. Instead of returning my call, he'd fired away a text message: "Took meds. No worries." As though reminding him to take his meds could have been the only reason I'd call.

My cellphone buzzed. "On the way now," Juni texted. I wished Karen would text as well, to confirm, at least, that she'd come as she had promised me last night. I should've been glad enough to have had two children and only two schedules to consider. I had wanted three, no, four children. In times like these, having more than two children was advantageous: Juni came to take my place in the morning so I could

have breakfast and a shower; Karen came in the evening so I can have dinner and brush my teeth; if I had had a third child, I'd have a replacement for when I went to Bambang for medical supplies; and if I had had a fourth child, I might even get lunch and window shop a bit at the mall across the street.

Chet had said we should have only two kids—because I only had two hands. Well, we could have had four kids. I had two hands, and Chet had two hands too. But, Chet had said his hands were for lugging diaper bags and foldable playpens and fishing out his wallet from his back pocket to pay bills. So, holding the kids when they were toddlers was my job because even when I had a back pocket, I never kept my wallet there and I had never paid for the bills. That had made sense to me back then. Chet had always made sense. Anyway, Chet had been right about having his hands free. His hands had needed to be free to fish out his inhaler from his front pocket. I reached for Chet's hand on the bed and squeezed it hard but he didn't squeeze mine back.

Chet's mom had asthma, too, though she had not died of it. She had gone in for some routine colonoscopy under general anesthesia. Something had gone wrong, or they had found something that they had to surgically excise. She had caught pneumonia in the hospital during recovery. When my mother-in-law died, I was terminated from my role as mother-in-law pleaser but I had taken over the new role of curator of my mother-in-law's teapot collection.

I had dusted her sixty teapots fifty-two times every year for five years after my mother-in-law had passed away. The teapots reminded Chet of her so I could not throw them away or give them away. After Ondoy, Chet had the house re-ceiled. I had wrapped the teapots in old newspapers and stowed them in a box in the store room. It must have been genetic, that drive to collect things. Juni had collected action figures from fast food kiddie meals. Karen had collected resentments. They took after Chet who had collected ref magnets—we had bought an upright freezer because we had run out of space for his ref magnet collection on our 18 cubic feet refrigerator. He memorialized every business trip and every family vacation with a ref magnet. By force of habit, Chet had also collected metered-dose inhalers. I had never been one to collect knick-knacks.

I didn't know how two people who were so unlike could be married to each other. I mean, okay, maybe opposites attract. And being compatible didn't mean everything between us had to be identical—no, wait, our names were compatible: Cecilio and Cecilia, a.k.a. "Chet" & "Ching." On Facebook, we shared one account "ChetChing Cortes." It was my account. I opened it. But my friends were mostly Chet's classmates from grade school and high school. Chet couldn't have been bothered to take his

maintenance medicine, much less, to keep in touch with his friends and relatives on Facebook.

Each time Chet had gotten a new phone, I had downloaded the Facebook app on it and then logged in to my account on his new phone. That way, he could have replied to his friends himself. But Chet had always been too busy, he could not have bothered. He asked me to type in his messages to his friends, in their chats. It wasn't fair for him to add the role of secretary to my already long list of roles. He had paid his secretary at work to send correspondences, but he had expected me to manage his social media for free. Of course, Chet had always replied, "But all this is yours when I die. All that's mine is yours." Oh, yes. All his wealth will be mine – to distribute among his creditors, no doubt.

On the bright side, all four of us will be in one room at last. The past five years or so, we'd been together only for hurried Christmases and New Years. Last night, the nurse had told me to make sure my whole family would be around for when Dr. Alcaraz came on his rounds this morning. Dr. Alcaraz had wanted to talk to all of us. So, today was a special occasion. I mean, for two days since Pitoy had rushed Chet to the ER, no one told me anything but that Chet had had a massive heart attack. Now, all of a sudden, Dr. Alcaraz wanted Juni, Karen, and me present together in one room to tell us something—what else could he want to tell us? That they need to operate, I bet, and they needed the whole family's consent. And then, Chet will be better and life will go on.

Chet had been lucky, though. Pitoy had noticed on the rearview mirror that Chet's head was no longer visible. He had slumped in the backseat. It was lucky, yes, and ironic too—Chet was then on his way to see his doctor for his annual checkup after having taken his lunch on Roxas Boulevard. Chet was two months away from retirement. He had usually sat in the front passenger seat with Pitoy, but on that day, he had sat in the back. Pitoy said Chet had been on the phone before he became quiet. That had been when Pitoy looked in the rearview mirror.

My stomach growled again and just then, as though on cue, an orderly brought in Chet's breakfast tray. I wondered why there'd be meals for patients on this wing when all of them received nourishment through an IV. Meals were included in the daily rate for the room, I supposed, and it was meant for the relative keeping watch over the patient anyway. I ought to know, right? At midnight for the past two days, I'd gone down to the Accounting Department and I'd asked for a printout of the running bill. Then I had gone to the ATM at the lobby, and withdrew money from several accounts until I had enough to pay at least half of the running bill for the day. With the sum I had paid every midnight for the past two days, Chet and I could have

gone on that 4-day/3-night tour of Osaka I'd been wanting to take. We could have even taken Juni and Karen and the grandkids. Chet had said, sure, when he got his retirement pay, we'd go. At the rate Chet was racking up hospital bills, he might not have much of his retirement pay left.

To help keep hospitalization costs down, I'd taken trips to Bambang to buy disposable syringes, gloves, tubes, and other supplies. The hospital's drugstore and supply room charged twice, maybe three times more than the stores in Bambang. If this dragged on longer, I would have to use the credit cards to pay the hospital bills. I was glad Dr. Alcaraz had scheduled time to talk with us today. I must remember to ask him for a medical certificate to process the medical and hospital insurance claims for Chet. I must not forget to file the PhilHealth claim as well.

My stomach growled again so I took the breakfast tray and peeled off the plastic cling wrap. I had no problem eating hospital food, unlike Chet's personal assistant, Michelle. She had visited yesterday. She had brought flowers, balloons, and a teddy bear from Chet's staff. She had also brought for me to sign the PhilHealth claim form, the private medical insurance claim forms, and the office payroll. After I had signed it, Michelle had given me an envelope with cash in it. She said I'd have to go to the office and sign for Chet's retirement check the coming week. The firm had decided to give Chet his retirement pay early. Michelle had blanched when I had asked her to stay and eat the lunch the orderly had brought in while I counted the cash in the envelope.

The cash in the envelope matched the amount in the payroll I had just signed. It was enough to make two more midnight payments, at least. Michelle then said she'd be by again to give me the cash equivalent of Chet's unused leaves. They had not deposited it into his ATM account, Michelle had said, in case I needed it—they must have thought I didn't know Chet's PIN, or something.

Chet had been better than most husbands in that regard—he had always been organized about the family's finances. There was a bank account and credit cards for household expenses and recurring bills. All our deposit accounts were "OR" accounts, in case of emergencies, and only one of us was capacitated to sign. Chet had trusted me to leave the bank accounts intact, to not drain them, but he always questioned the brand of toothpaste, shampoo, or cereal I had bought.

When I had finished counting the cash in the envelope and had stuffed it in my purse, I then offered Michelle a packet of crackers which she also refused. She had then burst into tears and nearly tripped as she went out the door to the balcony. "I'm so sorry. So sorry," she had said and left.

What was she sorry for? Maybe she was shocked, embarrassed, or uncomfortable. Her boss was lying there, unconscious. Maybe Michelle was the kind who cried at the

movies or while watching poignant fast food commercials. Maybe she was sad. She could have thought of Chet as a father figure of some kind. Although Michelle hadn't been Chet's assistant for even a year. Well, eight hours together in an office every day could have felt like a lifetime.

Pitoy had said that Chet was talking with someone on the phone in the car when he collapsed. Pitoy had given me Chet's phone in the ER. I rummaged through my purse for Chet's cellphone. It was easy enough to check the call history. Chet recorded all his phone calls for reference. Not that I could blame Chet or Michelle. I'd read an article on the internet. That article had said that all it took for an office affair to thrive were proximity and availability. Michelle had certainly been very available and proximate to Chet. She was young and pretty, well-endowed in all the right places, too.

I held Chet's smartphone in my hand. Chet wasn't as smart as he had always thought himself to be. He had kept a small notebook where he had kept a list of passwords and PIN numbers. And even without that cheat sheet, Chet had only ever used variations of their birthdays and wedding anniversary. It wasn't difficult for me to learn what his phone PIN was. Everything was easy to a determined wife who had time on her hands.

I was not naïve either. I had always known about Chet's high school sweetheart. Chet had never talked about it. But then a lady had friended me on Facebook who was also from Chet's high school. Her first post on my wall was their class picture. A red circle had been drawn around Chet and a girl in that photo. They stood next to each other in the picture. The caption read: "Blast from the past."

Nature had a way of helping wives discover their husbands' well-kept secrets. Tropical storms in the Philippines were so powerful, they washed away foundations of substandard roads and bridges, eroded the top soil from shallow graves in vacant lots, and if a wife were really lucky, a tropical storm revealed holes in the roof and dripped rainwater onto well-insulated boxes of pictures and high school yearbooks in a store room.

Chet had not wanted to help me clear out the wet boxes; why would he? He'd have only sneezed and wheezed from the accumulated dust and layers of mold. In one box I had found Chet's high school yearbook. I was no fool. They had been together in every photo of every extracurricular activity of every club in that school. She was pretty, and she had pretty handwriting too, Chet's high school sweetheart. I had even found a bundle of letters. My theory was, they had only parted ways because while they had both passed the UPCAT, Chet had gone into BA in Diliman and his girlfriend had been admitted into the College of Dentistry in Manila. Even with all

the YouTube videos of Karen Carpenter on Chet's browsing history, my goodness, I had always known it wasn't Karen Carpenter our daughter Karen was named after. I was not that stupid.

If I had given birth to a menopausal baby and Chet had named it Michelle, then I'd have known for sure about Michelle, his assistant. I wondered if Chet had had any other children with any other women and if he had named any of his other children Cecilia after me.

I sighed. This was neither the time nor place for dredging up debris. I put Chet's phone away. Of course, Michelle's outburst could not have meant anything at all. She could have been afraid of catching germs from the hospital food, maybe she had refused my offer of the lunch tray and became emotionally overwhelmed that I'd insist she eat the hospital lunch. I'd have been in tears, too if I had to eat the hospital lunch. It came in that plastic tray, with plastic cling wrap. Who knew if the food attendants had washed their hands after they went to the bathroom and before they handled the food on the lunch tray? I shuddered at that thought but it was too late as I had eaten half of the breakfast on the tray.

I liked to make my own meals for myself, pasta or something light like that. The hospital lunch tray yesterday had fish, rice, soup, sautéed vegetables, and a banana; a simple meal, nourishing, but totally lacking zing or flourish. Life was too short to live without zing and flourish. I sighed again. It was nearly 6 a.m. Unable to ignore my stomach, I sat and balanced the breakfast tray on my lap to polish off the contents of the tray.

One spoonful of oatmeal was on its way to my mouth when Juni came in through the balcony sliding door and said, "Ah, breakfast. Thanks, Ma. I'm so hungry." He sat next to me on the bench and slid the tray from my lap to his. Not even a kiss on the cheek or a touch of the back of my hand to his forehead, the minimum gesture of respect that even toddlers in the Philippines managed just fine. Juni was happier to dive into the oatmeal than to see me. Well, in that way, Juni was, indeed, Chet's son. No doubt about that.

I took my purse from the floor between the bed and the nightstand, and walked toward the sliding door that opened to the nurses' station.

Juni said, "Ma, bring me back a burger and spaghetti, will you? I don't think this will fill me up."

Juni had been a picky eater when he was a boy and now he ate anything. He was twenty-four but he had what celebrity magazines called a "dad bod." Maybe that was had been what Juni aimed for, a dad bod. The magazines lying around the ICU said dad-bods were more attractive to intelligent women. Maybe the *Time* magazine links

on my newsfeed were right—appetite increased in inverse proportion to the number of hours slept every night. Juni hardly slept at night, so that explained his appetite. Chet had a good appetite, too, for steamed rice and rich stews.

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner always had to be rice and meat stew or fish stew at our house. Whatever I had cooked for lunch could never simply be reheated for dinner. Chet had always wanted a different thing for dinner, preferably, something I had whipped up from scratch. Chet had probably thought I needed to keep myself occupied. There was one good thing about being in the hospital, after all. I had a day off from cooking Chet's meals.

"You'll be right back?" Juni asked. "What time will the doctor come by? I forget."

"I won't be long."

"You think they want to operate? Maybe do other tests?" He said this in between mouthfuls of oatmeal and what was left of the poached eggs.

I shrugged.

His voice dropped to a whisper. "The patient in the other room? He's not there anymore. It's empty. I walked right by there on my way here. I hope that doesn't happen to us. Not yet. I'm too young to be orphaned."

"Don't be morbid. For all you know, the patient next door had already been transferred to a regular room."

"Uh-uh. You were out yesterday. First, there was this loud beeping. All the staff ran next door and then, after a few minutes, all the relatives cried."

"Maybe they received the hospital bill."

"No way. The wife was on the phone right there outside the balcony."

"Didn't your mother ever tell you it's wrong to eavesdrop?" I shook my head.

"Nyah, my momma didn't raise me right," he said this with a chuckle and he stood up and hugged me. "Mommy," he said in that cloying-toddler voice of his.

I rolled my eyes. I was hungry. I needed a shower. I never liked gossip. Juni laughed. I smoothed out the sheets and pulled them up around Chet's chest. I straightened out the supplies on the nightstand. I took the breakfast tray Juni had emptied and wiped clean with a piece of bread, and I put it by the door. I left word at the nurses' station that I was going out for some breakfast but that I'll be back. Then I took the stairs down to the ground floor.

The hospital kept the three-story edifice of the old hospital, the wooden staircase and the wrought-iron banister from the late 1950s when it had first been built. The modern building began with the fourth floor up. The newer part of the hospital complex had been constructed around the old façade. Even the cafeteria was still where it had been when I was a child. My mother had brought me here for my

shots at the pediatrician's. It was here also that I had brought my own children to see their pediatrician for their shots.

I took my car keys from my purse. I was near the lobby doors when I decided to eat at the cafeteria, instead. They used to sell moist cinnamon rolls there before—I'd have that if they still sold that, and coffee, maybe some bacon and a fried egg, if they had it. I could just buy two of whatever breakfast they had and bring one up for Juni. If he wanted more, then he should have his favorite burger and spaghetti delivered to the room.

The cafeteria had no air conditioning, but it did have floor-to-ceiling jalousie windows and ceiling fans. I sat facing the rear of the building where the parking spaces for doctors were. From the balcony of Chet's room, I looked down on this parking lot. The only difference was, from Chet's balcony, I could see the river and the factories and shanties on the other bank. In the cafeteria, a thick wall as high as the second story of the hospital stood guard and held the river back.

In September 2009, when a mere tropical depression had dumped a month's worth of rain in just twelve hours, the river had jumped from its banks and overflowed the parking lot. TV footage had showed all the doctors' cars floating in the parking lot like die cast toys. I checked the sky, just in case. But it was April, the chance for tropical depressions or typhoons was low.

Over sips of rice coffee, it occurred to me that I should give Pitoy a raise—he had asked for one in January and I had said I'd think about it. I had no choice but to give him that raise—he deserved it. After Pitoy had noticed that Chet's head was no longer visible on his rear-view mirror, he had flicked on his headlights, he had honked his horn, and he had nosed out of his lane onto the opposite lane. When a traffic enforcer had stopped him he had asked for the enforcer's help and got himself a police escort to the hospital. At the ER, Pitoy had sent a text blast to all of us. He had shown presence of mind, that Pitoy.

When Pitoy had finally arrived at the emergency room, Chet had been unconscious for at least fifteen minutes, the doctors said. They had sat in traffic for who knows how long before Pitoy had even noticed that Chet had collapsed in the backseat. The ER staff had compressed his chest, defibrillated him, injected adrenaline into his heart, ventilated him, still, there was no pulse. Then, Pitoy had bitten Chet's big toe—the monitor had flickered with a heartbeat, in response. I would never have bitten Chet's big toe, and I was his next of kin, his wife. Now I really had to give Pitoy a raise to reward him. He had saved Chet's life.

Of course, with Chet in the hospital, Pitoy was just in the house probably watching TV right then. Although, yesterday, Pitoy had washed the cars, cleaned the

driveway, and pruned the plants. After that, there was nothing else for him to do but sit the rest of the day. And, of course, I had no way of knowing if all the chores he had said he had done, he really had done. I only spoke on him on the phone. And even when he did just half the work, I still paid him his usual weekly salary. Getting paid his full monthly salary even when he had not driven Chet to work, why, that was as good as a raise, wasn't it?

After this, Chet would retire, for sure. He wouldn't need a driver. Pitoy would probably ask for severance. Pitoy had been with them for twelve years, and his salary was P15,000 every month. One month's pay for every year of service came to about P180,000 if I let him go. That would set me back a lot. And there would be medical bills and professional fees to pay still. Who knew how much that would all come to? No one knew how long Chet would be confined. If he didn't get better, there would be other necessary expenses. Maybe, I'll give Pitoy his last salary and one more month's salary if it came to that. Family drivers were not really employees. If Chet were here with me, right now, Chet would argue that way. If Chet were here now, with me, that's what he'd do. Maybe Chet would wake up and then I wouldn't need to think about all this—Chet had taken care of financial things, that had been his job—I just cleaned up after him.

When I came up to the room, brown bag in hand, it was 9 a.m. Juni was snoring on the cot next to Chet's bed. Karen sat in the balcony, hunched over her phone while seated on the plastic bench. There was never any cell phone signal inside the room. Even when Karen had asked for the morning off from work, she still went through her emails on her phone. I bet when she came home from the office, she did her second shift with dishes and laundry too. I used to do that in the first few years of our marriage, until I had gotten pregnant with Karen.

I opened the glass door to join Karen in the balcony, but Karen didn't even look up from her phone. "I hope the doctor's not late," said Karen. "If he's not here by 11, I'll have to go. I have a meeting after lunch, and I'd have to wade through traffic to get back to the office."

"That's something your Dad would say." Karen had taken after Chet; daughters took after their fathers after all. Chet had never been demonstrative toward the children. He had always thought tenderness would make them soft. I'd never seen Karen hug her own children, either. But surely, she must love them—she worked hard to afford private school, she brought them to school every morning, went to all their activities, did homework with them, helped them with their projects. Karen juggled kids and work while she zipped and zoomed around all day walking the tightrope between home and work without a harness or a safety net. If Karen had

chosen work over family, she could have been Manager for Accounting by now, no, maybe even Assistant VP for Accounting by now. If Karen could afford a nanny, she could have left the kids and the nanny with me.

I had mentioned that to Chet once and he said, “We’re done. We raised our kids. It’s not our job to raise grandkids.” And then he added, “Karen should leave her kids with her husband—he’s their parent too.”

“What makes you think he’ll help with the kids? You never helped with your kids at all,” I said.

“I have a full-time paying job.” Of course, Chet had not yet forgiven Karen for marrying an artist. He had said, to end their discussion, “Since he’s in touch with his feelings, let him care for their kids.”

I wasn’t one to argue with Chet. But after Karen had given birth and when Chet left for work in the morning, I had gone over to Karen’s house and played with my grandkids, read to them, took them shopping. When my grandkids had started school, from my allowance I had paid for the school service to bring them to my house. Karen picked them up on her way home from work and Chet had learned, by then, to come home late.

I ran my fingers through Karen’s hair. My hair used to be thick like hers.

She said, “I found one gray hair yesterday.”

“On your head, right?”

It was good to hear Karen laugh.

I said, “If I had life to do over, I wouldn’t quit my job to raise my kids. I’d be like you.”

Karen looked up from her screen. “It would’ve been harder for you, Mama. No cell phones then, no email, no internet.”

“Not as much traffic, though.” What I would have given for a do-over. “They grow up eventually. And then, someday, all your hard work will be over.”

“Yep. We work and then we die.”

Half an hour later, Karen had just taken her car keys from her purse, and was about to leave when Dr. Alcaraz arrived. He brought the results of the scans on a disc with him. He played the video at the nurses’ station and we huddled around the 15-inch screen of the laptop there. Ms. LabCoat did not look up from the records she was signing. None of the nurses looked at me.

“Chet’s brain no longer lit up when his name was called, or when his foot was pricked,” Dr. Alcaraz said. We walked back to the room. Dr. Alcaraz opened wide Chet’s eyelid and shone a light in his eye to show us that his iris no longer contracted under the bright light.

Juni sniffled, wiped his cheek, and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Karen checked her phone. Even at the ER, two days before, when they had told us Chet had suffered a massive heart attack, only Juni had cried.

“The last test to confirm that the patient is brain dead is to turn off the ventilator,” said Dr. Alcaraz.

Juni sobbed.

“You all need to sign a consent form for us to turn the ventilator off.”

“And if my dad doesn’t expire after we turn off the ventilator?” Karen wanted to know.

“If the patient survives and breathes on his own after the ventilator is turned off, he might never regain consciousness. Even if he regained consciousness, the patient would need round-the-clock care.”

Juni cried and hugged me. Karen took out her pen and signed the form. She called her office and asked for her bereavement leave. A few minutes later, Juni mopped his face with his sweatshirt and signed it as well.

I stood there, pen in hand. I should go to the bank first before I signed the form. The withdrawal form at the bank required an attestation that my codepositor was still alive at the time of the withdrawal. I’d need at least an hour to gather the funds to pay the hospital bill.