

## **FICTION**

### *Twilight*

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Was it twilight when she left? Dolores could not tell for sure. In the hustle and bustle that attended her departure from home in search of a new beginning, she failed to take note of the movement of the sun. Now aboard a train bound for Manila, she sat in a corner reconstructing her lost twilight. Even without closing her eyes to shut off the reality of diverse travelers, hawking ambulant vendors, and passing vistas of darkened landscapes, Dolores managed to retrieve most of the pieces which made up twilight in Rabon, her little barrio nestling precariously between the hills and the sea. She began her reminiscence by conjuring the image of the nipa hut which her father and forefathers had built and rebuilt to meet the challenges of time. From a small window which had lost its squareness, she saw herself watching the horizon where, she believed, dreams got born and reborn. Those meant to come true traveled half-way around the world and became real with every sunrise in the hills while those meant to be broken were dashed to pieces somewhere and washed ashore, together with the empty sea shells and wilted sea weeds, in the form of sea foam. How she hated the sight of the frothy thing, the likes of which she had seen in the mouth of a mad dog. No, she must not allow her mind to dwell on this monster which even in her sleep ran after her, threatening her with its toothless bite. She must think of the sun instead. Yes, the sun. On clear days it brings out the splendor in everything. The sky is magnificently blue, the sea a shining body of silver, the hills alive with green, and everything in sight splashed with colors so vibrant and distinct.

The train was now picking up momentum after a brief stop in some town. Dolores stuck her head out of the window in search of the sun. "Hoy," Bae Honorata, Dolores' guardian for the journey, said. "Don't you do that again. You must reach your destination with your head intact." Dolores barely heard the old woman for she was busy putting the sun between the sky and the sea. Everything was ablaze. Dolores blinked to relieve her eyes of the

dazzle. When she opened her eyes the sea had swallowed the sun. Now everything was touched with gray. The general haziness dissuaded her from using her eyes for further recollection. It was time for her to use her ears. Closing her eyes, she found to her amazement that the sounds of twilight readily came to her ears. There was the sea moaning like one in great pain; the seagulls flapping their wings as they looked for some place to rest for the night; the fishermen shouting instructions to their assistants in preparation for night fishing; the various animal sounds in the hills; and the mothers calling their young ones home. "Isko! Isko!" Dolores heard her mother's voice calling in the dark. The sound of the name brought a tightness to Dolores' breast. She had failed to bid her little brother goodbye for Isko had gone up the hills to gather firewood.

Once more Dolores stuck her head out of the window in the hope of seeing Isko's face somewhere. Without a word, Bae Honorata held Dolores by the chin and placed the wandering reckless head in a safe position. Dolores hardly felt the protective gesture of her companion for by that time the smells of Rabon at twilight were coming to her nostrils. Vigorously she sniffed in order to savor them all in full. Bae Honorata, perhaps thinking that Dolores was crying, patted her on the shoulders while saying in her most comforting tones. "There, there, my child. Don't you be crying. In no time at all you will be back home for the holidays." Unmindful of what she heard, Dolores continued sniffing. She freshened her lungs with sea breeze and enjoyed the briny smell of the sea until sea foam sneaked into her consciousness. To escape the taunt and threat of the substance, she fled from the sea and sought refuge in the hills. Up there she had the splendid opportunity to pick up pleasurable smells. To begin with, there was the smell of bonfires used to smudge the mangoes. How exciting it was to separate the smells of different leaves from the burning heap. Easily isolated was the odor of banana leaves burning. The remembrance of the smell made Dolores think of native cakes as well as her mother bent over an ironing board in some house in town. "Always run the flatiron over banana leaves so that it will run smooth," was one of her mother's many household tips designed to keep Dolores in the good graces of her employer. The thought of her mother sweating over another man's shirts made Dolores abandon the bonfires and look for pleasant memories. Feeling now the peristaltic movements of her stomach, she willed herself to stand by the gentle slope of the hills which was dotted with various households. From Nana Carnay's kitchen came the delicious smell of *pingaw* swimming in boiled vinegar with crushed ginger. A few meters away Akolao Pansang was roasting skinned frogs over live coals. The smell of her supper complemented perfectly Mama Piring's vegetable stew seasoned with *bagoong*. Dolores' mouth drooled. If only to prevent her saliva from escaping the prison of her mouth, she killed all thoughts of food by walking along the seashore where fishermen gathered. The fishermen smelled of *basi* and *alak* which they took to fortify

themselves against the coldness and roughness of the sea as well to ward off the hungry mosquitoes coming from the swamps. There was about them also the pervasive smell of tobacco which in Rabon was taken in long, fat cigars, which the women rolled on their bare thighs during the hot summer afternoons.

The journey was taking a long time to come to an end. Dolores was compelled to re-run her recollections over and over again. As the train moved further and further away from Rabon, more and more details found their way into her consciousness. When the train finally reached Tutuban Station, Rabon had become an idyllic place to live in and Dolores felt such a fool for abandoning it for some unknown, and perhaps inhospitable region of the earth. It was, therefore, with grave hesitation that she set foot on foreign ground. Bae Honorata had to shove her off the train and hold her tightly by the arm in a manner Dolores associated with policemen holding on to arrested criminals.

For the first time in her life Dolores experienced getting lost. It frightened her so much not to know where the rides all over the city were taking her. The panic in her breast did not die until the old woman finally recognized the geographical landmark of their destination. It was a picture of a girl displaying her nakedness while enjoying a bottled drink. In embarrassment for the girl's untoward display of flesh, Dolores blushed and shivered.

Dolores could not locate where the sun was to rise. Each time she looked up to see the sky for some familiar star her eyes got lost in the maze of wires crossing and criss-crossing against the sky. Neither could she tell the time, for her method of telling time would not work in the new place. Out in the new place one's palm lines were always visible no matter the hour. If it be five o'clock now, Dolores thought, she would be tending the clay stove where a pot was a-boiling with the ubiquitous thin porridge of brown mountain rice. When the children woke up they would get scolded for emptying the pot so quickly.

The sun was now coming out of its lair. Dolores felt glad, for now the problem of the location of the east and the uncertainty of time was solved. In spite of these major discoveries, however, Dolores still felt a general feeling of unease. It bothered her so much to observe that in the new place the sun did not rise where one hill joined another as in Rabon, but seemed to have been vomited by tall buildings above which dark clouds hovered so early in the morning. Dolores rubbed her eyes vigorously to sweep away the onslaught of drowsiness. Her hands were now back on her knees where all the tiredness of the journey seemed to have accumulated, Dolores was pulling herself together in an effort to stand tall and meet the sun when lo and behold! She saw a house the likes of which she had never seen before. The house was separated from its surroundings by a stone fence on top of which broken pieces of glass were embedded. As shafts of sunlight hit these broken pieces of glass, Dolores became mesmerized by their glitter. Soon

she was bedecking herself with jewelry. With all those dazzling diamonds on her head, neck, wrists, hands, and heaven knows where, she felt like a queen. Her complexion became clear and gave way to fairness; her nose rose to flawless pointedness; her hair waved and curled at the right places; her veins hid in her flesh; and her feet, which her mother likened to growing ginger, lost considerable width and turned pink at the heels. She felt beautiful indeed, and a sense of power surged within her. If only to test its strength she decided to go to town. First she visited the church in order to offer a few flowers to the Virgin upon whose head the biggest landowner had placed a coronet of gems. She was busy doing a comparative study of the Virgin's coronet and the one on her head when the priest spoke to her, inviting her to be the *hermana mayor* for the town fiesta. Of course, she was very willing. Already she could hear what the townspeople would say regarding the lavishness of her preparations. Nothing but five brass bands of the best *banda musico* in Central Luzon would rouse the people for the early morning mass in honor of the patron saint. Giving the Virgin's coronet a last appraisal she left the church and proceeded to the doctor's house. Upon seeing the sparklers on her, the doctor, who last year refused to treat her head wound, became solicitous of her health. So winsome were his manners that Dolores forgot her resentment. After the doctor gave her a clean bill of health, Dolores decided to go to market. She told her driver to get a girl or two from her retinue of servants back home. When the girls arrived, she took them to the butcher. She pointed a finger, where a heart-shaped diamond sparkled, to choice meat cuts hanging on tenterhooks. The butcher, who only yesterday refused to give her even only ligaments and bones to flavor the mountain rice, took them all down and placed them personally in her big basket. In his eagerness to get the patronage of a bejewelled lady, he failed to notice the pampano fish therein. Dolores at once remembered all the humiliations she had suffered at the hands of the butcher. "For your information," she began what she hoped would strike the butcher as a corrosive statement, "Pampano, sir, has soft flesh. Even people used to seeing *tarektek* (a medley of small and cheap fish) on their dinner table ought to know that. Never should pampano be made to suffer under the weight of carabao meat passed off as beef." She was going to say a lot more to the butcher when Bae Honorata tugged at Dolores' skirt, making her nearly lose her balance. "Ay, my child," the old woman intoned. "Needles are traveling back and forth inside my legs. Massage them, will you?" Dolores lost all her jewels in an instant. She squatted and started massaging the old woman's legs. When the veins finally fell to their proper places and the last needle left its sting, Bae Honorata announced, "Now we shall knock. Surely the servants are not paid for growing cracks on their backs.

Dolores made a fist and banged it against the metal door. "Are you angry?" the old woman asked. Dolores had no chance to answer for as Bae Honorata finished her question with the rise of her voice, the door swung

open. A maid in white uniform followed by a huge barking dog appeared.

"Do you start your begging so early in the morning?" The uniformed maid asked scornfully. Dolores paid no heed to what she said. Quickly she undressed the maid in her mind and put the uniform on her own body. Dolores felt queer inside the uniform prompting her to return it at once to its rightful owner.

"Tell Mrs. Razon Honorata Salvador is here." Dolores' companion told the maid in tones generally reserved for the sick of Rabon who came for her herbs. Trained to obey orders, the maid lost her scornful looks and meekly followed the order.

The two travelers squatted again for the metal door took too long to open up once more. Dolores felt numb in the legs. It was with discomfort that she managed to stand upon the cue of the old woman in order to greet a woman who came out to see them in a flowing gown abloom with yellow sunflowers. "I waited and waited for you last week. What happened?" the newcomer asked. Dolores was aghast at this sort of greeting for she expected the conventional questions on health and general well-being before anything else was said. Even Bae Honorata was clearly taken aback by the newcomer's directness in discourse. The old woman had to clear her throat two or three times before words came out of her mouth. "Well, Dolores was not permitted to leave home during the low tide. Her parents believe the opportune time for leaving is during high tide."

"Naku, *kumadre*, do you actually believe that?" There was laughter in the woman's voice which she stifled as she placed her hands on Dolores' shoulders. "And you must be Dolores," she said. "I remember you were baptized during harvest time. Do you know that I gave you a whole sack of rice for your first present?" she asked Dolores as if expecting her to remember that remote act of generosity. Dolores obliged by looking ever grateful. This must have had its effects on Mrs. Razon for soon she was making promises which sounded like music to Dolores' ears. "I shall make it worth your while if your work is satisfactory. You will be treated like a member of the family. The one who left was a liar and a thief, not to mention a glutton. *Sin verguenza*, she made it appear that all the chickens I bought managed to live without gizzards and livers." The voice trailed on, "And to think I was good to her. I gave her free clothes every now and then. I took her to my personal physician to rid her of her aches and pains, not to mention her worms which made her hungry all the time. I taught her how to cook, and when at last she learned to distinguish an onion from a garlic she ran away with my transistor radio and my husband's wallet after telling all my neighbors that my husband laid eyes on her. *Ilusionada, sin verguenza*." At this point Mrs. Razon took a deep breath and the pause must have made her realize that she had said more than enough. To divert Dolores' mind from her mouthfuls, she asked the question Dolores longed to hear. "How is your mother? Did you know, my dear, that your mother worked for many years

with my mother? She was a good and faithful servant."

"She is doing well, by the grace of God, ma'am." Dolores shocked herself with the ease she told a lie. How could she ever tell the nicely rounded lady of her mother's problems?

"That reminds me, *kumadre*," Bae Honorata butted into the conversation. Dolores fearing an impending expose of the real situation at home pleaded with her eyes for the old woman to keep quiet. The old woman ignored Dolores' plea and went right on to the point. "Lulay is requesting me to get from you an advance on Dolores' wages. You see...."

Dolores would not take her exposure as a liar. She plugged her ears with imaginary wads of kapok and thereby succeeded in muffling Bae Honorata's report on the state of affairs in Dolores' household. When the old woman stopped talking Dolores was certain that she had been thoroughly exposed. This emboldened Dolores to make a demand on Mrs. Razon. "Make it six months, ma'am. You see, my father is repairing the house and the harvest is just enough to feed us." There she lied again. What harvest was there? Her father spat blood during ploughing time and the owner of the land, upon seeing nothing but cogon on his property while the rest of the countryside smelled of growing rice, had given the land to stronger backs.

Mrs. Razon picked up the hem of her flowing gown, making all the sunflowers move. The two followed the sunflowers. When they reached a room full of beautiful things, Mrs. Razon told them to take a seat. Dolores chose a yellow chair whose softness soothed her rattled bones. She was busy wallowing in its luxury when Mrs. Razon appeared with crisp bills in her hands.

"Today is the maid's day off. Dolores, you have to prepare breakfast for all of us." Dolores sensed that Mrs. Razon was out to test her before the crisp bills changed hands. "Set that table over there," a beringed finger pointed to a round table covered by a gaily colored cloth. "From the kitchen take out some *pan de sal* from the oven and serve them with the *reguelto* the maid left on the skillet. Be sure to take out butter and cheese. And please put fresh cream in the creamer." Dolores heard a few more specific instructions which she could never repeat if her life depended on it.

The orders were given slowly. Dolores could never use the excuse of misunderstanding them because Mrs. Razon made sure that Dolores got all the words of the orders. Born out of the determination to get hold of all those crisp bills, Dolores sallied forth to the kitchen like a fisherman sailing in shark-infested waters. Caution and logic guided all her actions. She felt sure she would come out of the test victorious. After all was she not the best in Miss Manuel's class? Did not the teacher come to their house informing her parents that it would be Dolores and none other, who would deliver the valedictory address?

In the kitchen there were many contraptions the names of which Dolores did not know. Her plan of action was to open all those with doors in search

of the *pan de sal*, the only recognizable item in Mrs. Razon's tall order. Where the *pan de sal* was to be found must be the oven. Dolores opened and shut no less than four doors before she chanced upon the familiar item in the strange kitchen devoid of soot. "That is an oven, an oven, an oven," she murmured to herself as she went about looking for a thing called "skillet". "Lord of heaven, help me," she prayed silently. A good amount of prayers passed her lips and since no help seemed to be coming her way, she decided to help herself. From a contraption which emitted cold air that gave her gooseflesh, she took out what looked readily edible.

"The table is ready, ma'am," Dolores nervously announced to Mrs. Razon. Taking giant strides which made the sunflowers shake and dance, Mrs. Razon went to see the table. By her looks Dolores knew that a pittance was all she could get for her mother. "Hija," there it was coming, Dolores thought. "Setting the table is an art. Food must be presented in such a way that the appetite is aroused." Should it have to be? Dolores asked quietly as she thought of Isko's appetite. "The plate must lie face down on the place mat with the fork and knife on the left side and the spoon on the right side. Ay, hija, *reguelto* is never to be served in the skillet on the table. Put it on a *bandeja*. *Naku*, why did you put the dog food on the table? Hija, next time, if you do not understand my orders ask for further clarifications." The voice actually never stopped but Dolores let go of her attention. She was thinking of her family in Rabon. When she got back to the sootless kitchen with the many contraptions Isko would never believe existed, Mrs. Razon was addressing Bae Honorata. "The last maid broke many of my heirloom pieces. Yesterday I saw my grandmother's *supera* half-buried near the red palm in the garden. Dolores, you must never do that. Come, I'll introduce you to the implements you will have to contend with in your work. That is an oven. Near it is the refrigerator. This is my collection of china. For every day use we make the melamine wares suffice for they are unbreakable. The bone chinaware is reserved for special guests. Do you see that shallow dish? That is a *bandeja*. Bigger than that is a *bandejon*. Over there is a blender. Near it is a microwave oven." The voice trailed on and on, and the more Dolores paid attention to it, the more she felt like a *dalag* from a small creek thrown into the wide open sea. To cut short her introduction to kitchen paraphernalia Dolores who was very anxious to send as much money to her mother as possible, mustered enough courage to offer a superfluous confession. "I do not know many things, ma'am, but I am willing to learn."

The remark made quite an impression on Mrs. Razon. Soon Dolores saw Mrs. Razon's bejewelled hand go in and out of the capacious pocket that made the sunflowers dance. The last trip rounded the amount in Bae Honorata's hand to P2,000. Dolores was delirious with triumph. Already she could hear her mother say to the neighbors as they sat aligned along the bamboo ladder delousing themselves. "She is a dutiful daughter. Dolores is our salvation."

When it was time for Bae Honorata to depart for Rabon she cornered Dolores. Her tongue still licking the fat of that substantial breakfast she managed to say in between her final savorings. "I will deduct our fares, and P100 is for my trouble in taking you to this nice place. Please do not bring shame upon me by stealing, lying or flirting with boys. Be a credit to the womb that bore you." Though Bae Honorata was saying a lot more Dolores heard no more. Neither could she see the old woman's face. Tears gathered in her eyes. Soon they fell, drop by drop, into the sink where the dirty dishes of the morning lay.

## II

In a modest room beside the pantry hang a magazine clipping above the headboard of a spring bed. It announced to one and all: "HOME SWEET HOME". Dolores had placed it there in an effort to make the room hers. Former occupants had left their mark. There were pictures of movie stars, landscapes from old calendars, *imagens*, scrawled names and addresses, mathematical computations of wages, curses and obscenities levelled against an unnamed enemy, love notes, and various coded messages. Sometimes Dolores wondered what had become of her predecessors. Did they ever attain their goals? Or did they end up *bailerinas* in evil houses as Mrs. Razon hinted?

Dolores shared the room with two other girls. One was Veronica Palisoc, a burly Ilocana. She was good in ridding clothes of dirt, but whenever she opened her mouth it would seem that whatever dirt she took off from the clothes somehow managed to get into her mouth. Even when she uttered words of endearment she had to punctuate them with phrases like "the thing of your mother" or "devil's child". Dolores suffered a lot from her during the first few months. Veronica loved to tell everyone she met about Dolores' inadequacies. When the burly woman with the unbelievably black armpits hung up clothes and chanced upon the maids next door, Dolores often heard her say, "That devil's child won't last ten minutes in this house. Missus says she has a talent for turning soup into brine. And you know what? Dolores had us all in stitches when she said there was a ghost in the house. Missus made her pick up the phone and when Dolores heard the voice on the other line she yelled to high heavens and was hysterical for sometime. *Talaga*, what can you expect from a *provinciana*." To make matters worse the gossipy Veronica was also bossy, in fact more bossy than Mrs. Razon. While she read *Pilipino Komiks* she made Dolores iron bedsheets. She also pretended to know all there was to cooking when in fact, Dolores discovered, Veronica could not even fry an egg.

The other roommate was Lourdes Villanueva, a vivacious Visayan. She took care of the children. She was the self-anointed protector of Dolores against the Ilocana whom they called "Ilocantut" behind her back. For her services to Dolores, she demanded nothing in return except extra servings



of food kept in a secret place. Lourdes, who was so thin, complained so much of hidden hunger and Dolores never enlightened anyone as to why it took Lourdes so long in the bathroom.

Outside the room beside the pantry lived the people Dolores had to take orders from and to serve to the best of her ability. All in all, there were four adults and three children, not to mention the transients, who occupied the guest room, to contend with. Dolores found it easier to deal with the children than with their elders. Adults say one thing when they mean another. Take ma'am, for instance. She would tell Dolores to help herself freely to the food in the house and when Dolores did so Mrs. Razon's cheerfulness left her. Adults also tended to contradict themselves. Ma'am always cautioned Dolores to economize on cooking oil. To comply with the order Dolores curbed herself of the desire to let fish swim in cooking oil. The result was fish fried on the outside and raw in the inside. For hours, if not days, Mrs. Razon would be mentioning these. And what a talker she was. There was nothing left unknown to those who talked to her regarding the behavior of her maids. Dolores' misadventure with the electric mixer became a long-playing record.

Mr. Razon was a class by himself. He reminded Dolores of the sea-god in Rabon. Whenever he complained of the saltiness of the food at the dinner table, Dolores did not hear complaints but heard the onrush of waves when the tides were changing. She would listen to the complaints against her culinary creations entranced. It was with extreme amusement that Dolores listened to Mrs. Razon brag about her cook. "She is a gem of a maid. Imagine! My husband scolds her for her bad cooking and she takes it with a beatific smile."

Dolores liked the youngest member of the family whom everybody called Sam Pet. He was a source of sustenance in strange surrounding. In him lived all the brothers and sisters Dolores had taken care of. When the work in the kitchen was finished she made it a point to visit the baby in the nursery and handle him. It gave her an indefinable sense of fulfillment. Against her bosom its body felt warm and when it wriggled she sensed the rise of her nipples. Once when the baby urinated, Dolores felt the warm passage of the liquid bathing her down below. That night she dreamed a curious dream: Mr. Razon was knifing her all over because of salty soup.

On All Saints' Day Dolores read and re-read the letter she received from Rabon. Apparently Mrs. Razon persuaded Dolores' mother to cancel the proposed homecoming of her daughter for the holiday. Dolores had looked forward to lighting a candle for Laki Inngo, who was gored by a mad carabao in summer. The holiday offered her a splendid opportunity to impress her acquaintances with her many new acquisitions. There, by the unmarked grave of her grandfather, she would stand dressed in the lace dress Mrs. Razon said pinched at the waistline. On her wrist would be the wrist-watch of many a year's dream. Around neck would be the gold necklace with the suffering Christ on the cross which she had paid for in installments. And, of

course, she would bring the fattest candle the barrio had ever seen. And plastic flowers by the dozens! She would see to it that Talina, her Rabon neighbor who worked in Dagupan as a laundress to a Chinese family, would see all these. She had no doubts that sea foam would come out of Talina's mouth. "Ay, *sayang, sayang*," was all Dolores could say as she thought of the great possibilities of her aborted homecoming.

The New Year found Dolores ready for it. By this time she could tell garlic from onion as Mrs. Razon was want to say. In fact, Dolores astonished the Razons with her culinary creations. Her versions of *almondigas*, *relleno*, *galantina*, and even *French ragout*, silenced the sea-god at the dinner table. Even the transients in the guest room were all praise for her cooking. Not infrequently was she asked about the recipe of her *brazo de mercedes*, and in accordance with her mistress' instructions, she gave out the recipe but made sure to omit the dash of cream of tartar which was the secret of meringue-making.

Dolores was quick to pick up new tricks. In no time at all she was able to acclimatize thoroughly to the new environment. Gone were her old ways of squatting and delousing herself in public. On any chair she could now sit as well as her mistress, who was quite strict with leg art. She had also learned to walk in a manner Mrs. Razon said "had considerably improved because she does not leave three footprints even in high heels." The dresses she brought with her from Rabon had been made into rags. She had an *entirely new wardrobe consisting of hand-me-downs from her employer* and some new ones she had made patterned after the cut of her mistress' dresses, which the latter did not mind. At first she felt guilty about spending money for dresses, especially after her mother wrote her about the food shortage in Rabon. When the letters from Rabon came more frequently than usual and complained about her extravagance, Dolores had many dresses made and for many afternoons sang sad songs to Sam Pet. "See, my beautiful dress, Sam Pet, see my beautiful dress. A fairy godmother did not give it free, Sam Pet. I worked for it, worked for it, worked for it. Ay, Sam Pet, look at my hands. Love, life is sad." She gave the song all the sadness that had collected in her soul through the years. Sam Pet always slept before Dolores could sing it twice to him.

Hand in hand with the external renovations came internal ones. Inside, Dolores felt like a new person. She did not look back in nostalgia on her past life in Rabon. The future and the present were more important to her now. She promised herself that she would never end up like her mother. She would become a Mrs. Razon. And so towards this end she developed an enviable self-discipline. She read during her leisure hours. She watched television programs with the purpose of learning the English language. In front of the electric range she would practice her tongue to articulate words with "e" and "i", and "o" and "u", making sure that she did not interchange the pronunciation of the vowels. She listened carefully to the conversations

between Mr. and Mrs. Razon. She also paid particular attention to the speech habits of the Razon visitors. In no time Dolores managed to pick up a few tricks. She could actually aspirate consonants. She could also use some of their impressive expressions like "Fancy that", "You must be kidding", "Goodness gracious" and her favorite, "It stands to reason". However, when Dolores was overworked and she found her companions irksome her tongue reverted to the old ways and she was once more "Duluris". In spite of these sporadic setbacks, Dolores nevertheless felt completely acclimatized to the new environment. To celebrate her re-birth into a new world she gave up her Rabon nickname of "Doring" and became "Dolly". It was Lourdes, formerly Luding or Odes, now Lulu, who christened her. "Doring has no class *naman*." She said, "Why don't we call you Dolly? You know, like in sir's 'Hello Dolly' record." Dolores liked the sound of the name and so it came to pass that letters sent to Rabon were signed "With love, Dolly".

### III

Veronica and Lulu had long left the room beside the pantry. In their places several others came and went like the tide. Dolly had her season of bossing girls fresh from the province. How she was amused by their ignorance and indignant over their lack of virtue. There was Zenaida from Bicol who did not iron a single shirt for one day because she was too stupid. She did not plug the flatiron into the electrical outlet. Dolly lost no time in telling Mrs. Razon about it, who in turn, told it to her numerous visitors. It was the subject of many a conversation until Jovita came along. This one washed her face in the toilet bowl. For many months Dolly patronized her until Jovita packed up and went away without a word. In her place came Beatriz Lataverna who always mistook Mrs. Razon's things for her own. One day, while she was husking the floor she tripped and Dolly distinctly saw an underthing of the mistress. She confronted Beatriz who swore to heaven and her mother's womb that she was no thief and that Dolly should find time to have her eyes checked by an eye doctor. But the most fantastic feat belonged to a girl named Maria. This girl, in the words of Mrs. Razon, "had a straight tube for intestines." She ate everything she could, including the special food of the children as well as Mr. Razon's *hors d'oeuvre*. When she left, upon the insistence of the mistress, her dress was bursting at the seams. What Mrs. Razon did not know was what Maria did in Raffy's room. Dolly was discreet enough to keep that a secret, if only to save her employer from an imminent heart attack.

Mrs. Razon never failed to let her visitors know, be they friend or foe, new or old acquaintances, about Dolly's staying power. The way she played this top record, she made it appear that she was an ideal mistress and Dolly merely had the good sense to know heaven when she saw it. "I've had her since she was this small," the beringed fingers flew to her breast, "and it was

under my roof that she had her first period. When she came, poor thing, her bones jutted out and she could not even tell garlic from an onion. But look at her now! She looks well indeed, what with the high salary I give her, not to mention many fringe benefits."

That year when Raffy entered college and Sam Pet graduated from grade school Dolly looked for re-assurance that she was doing the right thing by staying with the Razons. She started entertaining doubts when Mrs. Razon told her flatly not to meddle with the upbringing of the children. Dolly caught Sam Pet taking a nip from his father's brandy. The boy had been doing many mischievous things lately and Dolly, who considered him as her own flesh and blood, thought it proper to pinch his ears. The boy reported the incident to his mother as well as the stories of *aswangs* and *kapris*. Mrs. Razon used angry words with her. She did not mind that so much. What made her very sad were Sam Pet's words, "You are only a servant." From that time on, letters to Rabon became frequent and she signed them "With longing to see you all, love, Doring." In June when the rains started to fall, Dolores joined in the backbiting of the other maids. She minced no words in expressing her disgust and regrets over her condition. "I have spent the best years of my life serving them and what do I get for that? Complaints and a measly wage. They don't love me one bit. They are good to me only because they cannot cook their own food and maids are hard to come by. Yesterday a friend of ma'am offered to take me to her daughter at Forbes Park. The wages are higher."

On the evening of the day she gave tongue to her disenchantment, Dolores skipped supper and lay on her bed. While waiting for her mistress to come in and confront her she suddenly remembered her HOME SWEET HOME sign. She took it down and carefully put it inside her suitcase. Already she could hear what Mrs. Razon would tell her. "Why would you like to leave us? Are we not kind to you? Is not our food your food, our roof your roof? Do you think that the extra few pesos that treacherous friend of mine offered to you will add to your happiness?" The distinctive footfalls of Mrs. Razon never were heard and Dolores, tiring of the long wait, closed her eyes and thought of *anor* in Rabon.

The nine consecutive days of rain ushered in the wet season. It was with great expectations that the farmers waited for the first monsoon rains. As the rains came crabs of all sizes and shapes were flushed out of their holes and carried by the floodwaters to the sea. People would come out of their houses to catch the dislocated crabs. They would beat the crabs with blunt instruments and imprison them in jute sacks while the homeless crabs were still stunned. As a child Dolores loved to station herself by a clump of coconut trees near the sea in ambush for the crabs. She had heard it from her mother's own lips that in that very place Dolores had her beginnings. Lulay of the languid eyes met her young man on the first day of the *anor*. He was from the neighboring barrio of Alakan, where in late summer of that year

Lulay tasted the sweet sap of the nipa, the *sinamit*, in his father's part of the swamp. He told her he would come for the crabs of Rabon. He did come. On the day the sun shone Lulay had given her heart away.

#### IV

On the last day of the *anor* Dolores' parents came. They came with a stranger. Dolores felt upon seeing the stranger that he had something to do with her fate. Thus when her father began his circumlocution she cocked her ears to be sure no word would escape her. "Dolores has no more debts to pay now," her father began after the tiresome narration of the destruction caused by the storm and the tungro infestation of the crops. "It is time for her to go home. Her brothers and sisters do not know her. They have been asking for her." Mrs. Razon yawned and asked if only to save everybody from the circumlocution. "Who is this young man?"

Dolores father cleared his throat and said, "Dolores is not young anymore. The time has come when her womb should bear fruit." Mr. Razon joined in yawning whereupon Dolores' father finally came to the point. "Pedro, the son of Iroy Kanding, who is Rabon's professional goat meat cook, wants to marry our Dolores. He had been tilling my plot for sometime now and his parents have given us a carabao. As soon as we return to Rabon he will start mending my fence."

Dolores looked at the stranger more closely now that she had heard an earful. He was no stranger after all. Vaguely she remembered him as the boy who sat three desks away in Miss Manuel's class.

Mrs. Razon cried when Dolores bade goodbye. "You are the best, Dolores, I shall never forget you. No one will. Please visit us often. Remember this is your home." In that instant Dolores forgot all her resentments against her. She remembered only Mrs. Razon's kind words and deeds such as that time when her beringed fingers bandaged Dolores' bleeding hand. Had Mrs. Razon asked her to stay then Dolores would have obliged. In that weak condition Dolores was a vulnerable one. She was hoping that Mr. Razon would not show up for her leave-taking, but before she knew it, there he was handling her a wad of bills while Mrs. Razon was not looking. The touch of his hand on hers burned all of her. It was fortunate that Sam Pet rushed at her to plant a peanut-butter kiss on both cheeks just as she was about to open her secret door. In the nick of time she forgot her burning for Sam Pet," she said. "Come to Rabon and visit me. I shall collect for you seashells and birds' eggs." Dolores could not continue talking. Drop by drop her tears fell on the red carpet of the sala.

#### V

Was it twilight when she left? Dolores could not tell for sure, for in the hustle and bustle which attended her homecoming to the land of her

forefathers, she failed to look at her wristwatch. Now aboard a train bound for Rabon she sat in a corner reconstructing her lost twilight in a house she thought was her home. In that house isolated from its surroundings by a fence of stones and broken pieces of glass, twilight was not seen but heard. The heavy drapery and the airconditioning froze a definite time. Dolores associated it with the witching hour of daybreak when it was pleasantly cold and the lighting was just enough to see objects in their softest lines. There were many beautiful and interesting things to see inside the house. Dolores got lost watching them so that she soon broke the habit of long standing: No longer did she like to watch the sinking sun. She waited for twilight in the receiving room where the grandfather clock announced its coming with a beautiful tune, "Für Elise". She remembered how she danced to its tune the first time she heard it. She was drunk with her dreams.

The children came home from school at twilight. Their noise invariably took away the dance from her body and the dreams from her head. She could not understand why these pampered children did not bother to appreciate the bounty thrown their way. The chime of the clock was music enough to last a lifetime but they had to drown it with noise. Raffy had to have his rock music; Sam Pet had to have his cartoons; Ana Marie had to tune in on her favorite disc jockey; and Mr. Razon had to read newspapers and yell for his slippers and Martini. Dolores hoped that her successor would learn to prepare the master's drink properly. Vermouth should merely rinse the glass or else the sea-god would thunder from his seat. No, she must not think of Mr. Razon anymore. She must think of something else, anything at all. Oh, yes, there was Sam Pet. There couldn't be a nicer boy than Sam Pet. At twilight he would lie flat on his belly in front of the television set. Whenever somebody bothered him, he never called his mother. Always it was Dolores. At this point of recollection, Dolores' vision became blurred. She started to cry. Because she did not want her companions to know that she was crying, she asked herself some questions. Would the Razons really miss her? What would Mrs. Razon tell her visitors about her? Dolores hoped that the lady would dwell more on her merits rather than demerits, but knowing Mrs. Razon she was fairly sure that the long playing record she would play would be devoted to the telephone incident, the briny soups, the broken dishes, and the barter of an old maid for a carabao. Then she remembered the cruel jokes of Raffy, the false accusations of Ana Marie, and the tactlessness of almost everyone. As the train moved nearer and nearer Rabon Dolores felt glad that she managed to get out of the trap in due time.

Dolores and her companions reached the house at dawn. It was still too early to unpack her things. Dolores headed for the tiny room where Isko was balled up fighting the cold with his young blood in the absence of a blanket. Even with the faint light, Dolores could see that the little boy she left behind was now in possession of well developed muscles and sinews. His presence in the room, in fact, made Dolores hesitate to stretch her tired back on the

bamboo floor. But she was very tired and emotionally spent, and in due time she ignored the lack of privacy to which she had been long accustomed. Against the hard bamboo floor she lay herself down. A jolt ran along her spinal cord. Dolores stood up quickly. She must see the sun.

From the window which Dolores' wages had made square once more, she watched the sea. Lining the whole shore was the sea foam. On that clear and bright morning Dolores wondered whose dreams lay mangled and reduced to tiny bubbles.

"Time to eat," a voice called out from somewhere. Dolores hurried to the kitchen. In the Razon kitchen she had often wished that the steak she was broiling would disappear and give way to *pising*, a dish of roasted *malaga* and a medley of leafy vegetables seasoned with fish *bagoong*. She could hardly wait to taste the dish. Now, at last, it was there waiting for her. It was placed in a sooty earthen pot. A ladle rested on one side of the pot's mouth. Dolores heard Mrs. Razon's voice from afar. "It looks like a boat with a paddle on it. Should you wonder if the pot sailed away?" Dolores removed the ladle quickly. She examined the stew. It was over-cooked and the smell was enough to make Dolores get a handful of her hair, put it over her nose, and drown the smell of the stew with Mrs. Razon's favorite shampoo scent. There was nothing more on the low table, the *dulang*, except the brown mountain rice which was heaped on a rusty plate even Julius, the Razon dog, would not care to eat from. There were no serving spoons of any kind. When they started to eat, the ladle made the rounds. Lips after lips slurped the soup and fingers after fingers dipped into the pot to retrieve the morsels of the roasted fish and bits of leaves. Whenever it was Dolores' turn, she let it pass for fear of the germs.

After breakfast, Dolores did not feel like going out of the house. Her plan to elicit the envy of her neighbors with her personal appearance in full regalia was set aside by her overwhelming fear of encountering more and more disappointing things about Razon. As the sun moved up she felt increasingly uncomfortable with an unbearable constipation. To relieve herself, she ventured to pay a visit to the outhouse. There she vomited the food she had eaten in the sanitary streamlined Razon kitchen. The celery in the Caesar's salad was still green and big enough to make a maggot wiggle as it hit its back.

At sundown Pedro invited Dolores for a walk along the beach. How the neighbors gawked trying to get a glimpse of her, the daughter who had provided a piece of land to her parents, the bride of the most eligible bachelor of the barrio. When they reached the sea the two sat where fishermen took shelter from the heat of the sun at noon. Dolores did not watch the sunset. She was busy talking. She told Pedro of her dreams. She wanted to have a house of her own. No, a nipa hut would not do. The one she had in mind was made of sturdy materials, and it must have a sala, a dining room, kitchen, toilet and bath, and at least two bedrooms. She also specified

running water as well as furniture and some appliances. "I don't think I would know how to cook with a clay stove." She said matter-of-factly. Pedro did not say anything. He gazed at the sinking sun. When she looked at him she noticed a pained look on his face. To her amazement, she discovered that she actually enjoyed seeing him feel discomfort as she elaborated on her impossible demands.

In accordance with the results of a diviner's tests, the wedding was to take place on the full moon. A week before the celebration preparations were already underway. A *ramada* was built near the house of Dolores' parents where the firetree was losing its blooms to the worms which swayed and swung on silky threads in the sunlight. Gaily decorated with shaved bamboo and woven coconut leaves, the *ramada* could seat the entire adult population of Rabon. Pedro's parents were quite vocal about the elaborateness and sumptuousness of the celebration. "Ha, does Ruping think he can give the biggest wedding feast in this barrio?" Pedro's father was wont to say as he sent more and more goods to the bride's residence. Demijohns of *alak sinamit*, and *basi* were lined under the house. Pigs were fattening in the tool shed. The chickens were feasted with mongo to improve their meat. Goats were given young palay leaves to sweeten their meat. Old women bared their thighs to roll the fattest of cigars. Dolores viewed all these preparations with boredom whenever she got tired of contempt. In the solitude of the tiny room made private with curtains of Ilocano blankets she could hear the voice of Mrs. Razon. "Why waste money on foolish expenditures. Remember, Dolores, all the trappings cannot unmake a monkey."

On the eve of the wedding the celebration started. There was drinking and the goats bleated their last. Dolores heard their cry. As she listened to them it was as though the knife that snuffed their lives also entered her bosom. For a time she could not breathe. When she did breathe formally again, her nostrils caught the smell of liquor and perspiration. All the menfolk were there unleashing themselves with the heady drinks. Mama Kardo was narrating how he won Nana Ipay. "She was catching frogs and I sneaked behind her and kissed her nape. She slugged me with her line and at once we were married." Now high on *basi* Mama Kardo was emboldened to elaborate on his wedding night. Dolores plugged her ears with her fingers. When she thought that Mama Kardo was still yakking. "Who would believe that Ipay is hotter than *cuatro cantos*, *markang demonyo*? She conceives at a sniff of my trousers. Ay, and Ipay does not drop a single one. Seventeen children will carry me to my grave." The men laughed very loud and to celebrate Mama Kardo's tale another round of drinks was served. In no time the drinkers were singing and dancing. Dolores' father took out the long bench under the house and the men were made to dance on the bench. Those who fell while dancing and singing were penalized with another glass of drink on the ground that they were still "sober enough to respond to the pull of gravity."



In the backyard where a makeshift kitchen was erected, the women cut up meat as well as reputations, especially of people who were absent. Not a few were cooked along with the meat. Dolores was sure, as she watched their chins move, that her very own reputation had been quartered, chopped, ground, and fried. She did not like the way these women looked at her belly the first time she took a walk along the seashore.

At night a cock which had escaped the knife crowed. While Dolores listened to it Pedro was brought to the house by his drinking companions. He was singing in his drunkenness.

"If you were a lemon drop,  
I won't swallow you at once.  
I shall, with my tongue, move you about  
Round and round and round, my love.  
I shall lick you here and lick you there  
In fullness I shall suck your sweetness.  
I won't swallow you at once,  
If you were a lemon drop."

He did not finish his song for he soon fell asleep.

By moonlight Dolores examined her bridegroom. She noticed his misshapen nose. All over his face were pimples. Some were so big, with craters oozing out a white substance. Feeling annoyed by them she let her gaze travel to other parts of his body. She came upon the protuberance in his person. Dolores trembled. A feeling of nausea overcame her. Then and there she vomited and as she was too ashamed to be seen doing it outside the house she tried very hard to control herself and in the process swallowed her own vomit.

Then she reached a decision.

## VI

Before the sun was out, Dolores was on her way to the bus station. She passed the sea. The sea foam leaped at her threatening her with its toothless bite. Her suitcase with the HOME SWEET HOME clipping fastened on its lid had gotten wet with the froth. Dolores hastened her steps. When she reached the station she faced a whole fleet of busses. Then like Sam Pet of long ago she closed her eyes and recited unfeelingly, "Eenie, meenie, minie, mo/ Cut the tiger and she'll go." Her finger pointed to a half-filled bus. She did not bother to look at its signboard. She boarded it at once. On a seat farthest from the driver she sat among melons and a tied pig. When the bus started to pull out of the station Dolores took one long look at the place for the last time.

The bus was now on its way to its destination. Dolores looked out of the window for some familiar object. She saw mountain ranges enclosing all of Central Luzon. She saw them moving in on her so close that the sun could not seem to rise. Everything looked gray and hazy. With fear and trembling Dolores felt she would have a long journey into the twilight.