

# UC Riverside

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## Abstract

## Acknowledgement

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## Still Motion

April 26, 2014. She felt the motion as her body was forcefully swayed back and forth, side to side. She felt light on her feet despite putting pressure on her body to try to have control over it, keep her balance, and prevent herself from feeling like falling. She closed her eyes. *Where's America? When will I get there?* She opened her eyes, slowly, and looked at the vastness of what laid before her eyes. Blue. *Beautiful blue.* But she didn't see just blue. Somewhere in that infinite blue was a ball of fire, and it shone warmly, gently. The brightness of the sun had always brought pain to her sensitive eyes. She could never stare at it before. But now, she stares at it, and never did it ever provide her warmth in a cold atmosphere. The sun fed her with its warmth while the air whispered breezes that caressed her cheeks.

“Excuse me, Ma'am?” a sweet, low voice suddenly stole her attention.

She looked to her left and saw a fresh-looking lady wearing a white uniform with a silky blue handkerchief enveloping her neck. Resting on top of her bunned hair was a white cap that resembled one of the paper boats she used to make with Kuya on a rainy day, when they would carefully tear the window screens enough for the paper boat to fit and fall. They'd drop it, and the paper boat would float west where the humid air blew. It floated, and they watched it be carried away by the raging, mud-like flood until it turned to a corner their eyes could no longer reach.

“Yes?”

“Will you please close the window?” she asked, her bloody red lips pointed sharply at the oval window. “The other passengers are sleeping.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” her heavily-powdered face smiled as she pushed away with her a little cart her hands were so locked on.

She closed the window shut, and the air suddenly turned dark. She looked round her and only saw in the shadows still bodies that sat upright, unmoved and unbothered from all the turbulence. The breeze that circulated only round her cheeks eventually began to spread throughout her body, underneath her clothes to the surface of her body, reaching her toes from the inside of her socks. She shivered. She stretched her right arm out to the vent where the whispering air travelled from and let her freezing fingertips slide to close the little spaces where darkness and coldness peeked from. She lifted herself to sit upright, firmly pressed her back to the seat, and let her arms rest on each side of her body. And there she was, closing her eyes, feeling her mind float in the air.

*When will I get there?*

She pictured Dad’s face in her mind. The face she knew she would not get to see nor touch for who-knows-how-many years...



*Traysikel*

Sometime in January 2008, when Dad had already left the house, Mom started talking about America and Tito. It would always be what they talked about while having lunch and dinner together. Tito Joey was Mom's first boyfriend. She said that, when Tito had to leave for America, he had asked Mom to go with him.

"But I was still so young. And he left. We kept in touch, exchanging letters and talking over the phone once a week. But it didn't work, and that's when I met your dad. But now that I'm going to America, when I get there, there's a chance that I might be able to see Joey. If I do, can I be with him, mga anak?" Mom asked. Her lips were smiling, but there was something in her eyes that seemed empty, and they spoke to Mira more than the smiling lips Mom wore did. Her eyes looked wet, sparkly.

Staring down at her plate and feeling Mom's gaze, Mira responded, "Yeah," and suddenly looked up to Kuya as if the word carelessly slipped right out of her mouth. She saw Kuya looking directly at Mom. Mira knew she should not have answered so quickly, because the youngest should always be the last to say something.

"If that's what'll make you happy, Mom," Kuya said.

"Yeah, we'll be okay with it," Ate expressed while nodding, her gaze fixed on her plate.

"Salamat, mga anak," Mom said.

Mira looked back down to her food. She swung her legs freely underneath the table and, holding her silver spoon on her right hand, she softly, quietly dragged it in circles on her plate.

*Where's America?*

All of the other days were a blur, as if there was no yesterday, only a now.

“Well, this is it Mira,” Mom said as she placed her right hand on Mira’s cheek. “I’ll be leaving for now, okay?”

Mira nodded. When Mom pulled her hand away, Mira opened her mouth. *Are you really leaving? How long will you be gone?*

But Mom had already turned her back to Mira, and the words never came out of Mira’s mouth. She felt something stuck in her throat, something hard. It didn’t let her swallow, didn’t let her talk. It only hurt. As she stood frozen, a loud clinking rang sharply in her ears – that clinking, the clinking of the house’s gate which always announced Mom’s arrival each night. *I remember.* Mira ran from the living room to the gate, but Mom was already outside of the house, and Mira could not go out alone. *It’s dangerous outside, Mira, especially when you’re all by yourself. It’s very dangerous.* She held on tight to the metallic bars of the gate and watched Mom’s steady back from a distance. Her unstoppable legs, feet travelled to the *traysikel*. Mom never looked back.

On her first night without Mom home, when Mira walked in their room to go to bed, she stared at Mom and Dad’s bed. She got on their bed and reached out for the pillows that Mom used. Mira laid there, lifted the pillow, and stared blankly at it. She closed her eyes and pulled

the pillow closer to her face until it touched her nose. She left the pillow at rest on her face as she spread her arms and felt the warmth of the bed's sheets. The cold touch of the pillow's silky sheet on her nose... the scent... that sweet scent... *What's this? When will I be able to smell this again once this leaves her pillow?* The act that she had always done whenever Dad left home, she never thought she would do the same for Mom. Now, neither one of them were there, and the bed's never felt nor looked huge and spacious to Mira. But her eyes were dry and tired already.

The next day, one of her classmates approached her.

“Hey, Mira! Why haven't you been talking at all today?”

“I—”

As soon as Mira opened her mouth, she felt something hard stuck in her throat again.

“What's wrong?” the girl asked.

“I—”

“What?”

Mira immediately covered her mouth and reached out to grab the girl's hand. She pulled her and started running to the restroom.

“Hey, what's wrong? Why are you crying? Does your stomach hurt? I can call our teacher.”

“No...” Mira covered her face with her hands as she bent down and let her knees touch the ground. “My mom left.”

“What? Where did she go?”

“She left,” cried Mira, tightly gripping the tie on her uniform.

“Where to? I’m sure she’ll come back soon.”

“No... they left me.”

*Chrysler*

The plane had already stopped for quite a while. *Fifty minutes and I still haven't gone off.* Everyone's standing, lined up, with their bags glued to their backs. Mira remained seated. She thought it would be exhausting to be standing up in the line for such a long time. But then the line soon started moving, and the passengers began talking. Everyone, in synchrony, placed their bags before them and dug out from the pockets little booklets that Mira similarly had been holding on to. The passengers began marching out of the plane. She stood up, scooted to the end of her seat, and then blended in with the line of passengers. They walked and walked. Marched until a pale-skinned officer, whose hairs hid underneath his navy cap, halted at them. He raised his left arm up and presented his soft-seeming palm to Mira and her fellow travelers.

“Please have your passports ready!” the officer yelled.

*He says it like he doesn't see that everyone's already holding them.*

They stayed in line, behind a yellow line, till a person behind a window, from inside a tiny, glass room said *Next*. The officer would then signal to the next person in line and instruct him or her to head to the available window, *like he doesn't know that we see which window is available already and hear the workers say "Next."* On Mira's turn, she did not look at the officer when she heard one of the workers say next. She walked past him with her head down, eyes locked onto her passport as she let her thumb touch each page of it. She handed her passport over and, when they flipped it to the last page, after seeing her name and picture, they stamped on it. Mira couldn't clearly see the person's face. Her reflection masked him. He handed back her passport and signaled that she could finally leave his window, so Mira nodded despite looking at her own

reflection. She pulled and pulled her luggage. Walked and pulled some more. Filipinos walking in front and behind her. To each they walked and pulled. It felt like walking through a maze, except their paths were carved for them so obviously. They knew when they should turn and where to head next. Until the trail ended... and then a huge crowd of people, lots of heads. A sea of blondeness and blackness, it appeared. Somewhere in the middle of that mixed sea was a short, shoulder-length black hair with a face that looked very familiar. She saw Mom who was waving so much to her. Surrounding Mom, she saw the faces of the crowd, smiling at her, in the background. They appeared shiny that Mira could not help but clearly see them from behind Mom, even though her eyes were locked on Mom.

*Why are they...? Am I just seeing things? Should I smile back? No, I don't know them. And maybe they're not really smiling at me.*

Mira opened her arms wide as soon as she saw Mom open hers. Seeing Mom's eyes that appeared to be sparkling from tears, Mira could not help but let her own eyes sparkle as well. They both rushed into each other with their arms spread out until the space between them was no longer visible. As Mira squeezed Mom tight in their embrace, her crying only made her sniff Mom's scent. That familiar sweet smell. *Like a ripe mango. No, like a chocolate? Or maybe like a rose-scented fabric softener? No, I don't know. But it's that... something really pleasant. Really sweet. Really... motherly. I can't believe it's been five years. And you still smell exactly the same.*

Mom broke away from the embrace and held onto Mira's shoulders. She looked at her, smiling, and then shifted her gaze. Mira copied. She then saw...

“Mira, this is your Tito Joey,” said Mom as she freed her hands from Mira’s shoulders and grabbed Tito by his arms.

“Hello po, Tito,” Mira greeted, slightly bowing, and then shook Tito’s hand.

“Hi, Mira,” Tito responded. He shook her hand but pulled her arm afterwards to give her an embrace. “Welcome.”

“Thank you po, Tito.”

“We should get going now,” Mom said.

“Yeah.”

They began walking out of LAX and, as soon as they walked past the doors, Mira shivered from the wind that suddenly hit her face. *But it doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t feel...heavy.* The air felt so light. It was 4:30PM, but the sun wasn’t as bright anymore as it would be in the Philippines at 4:30PM. It was also a little chilly. *I wish I wore a thicker jacket. But I don’t have anything thicker than this. Besides, I only have this cause Dad gave it to me. I don’t have any other jackets.* They started walking to a tall, cemented parking structure. There were lots of cars, and Mom said that the car they brought with them to pick Mira up was a rental mini-van. Mira was walking a bit behind. Her stomach was aching. *It must be from the cold, only-slightly-cooked food I had to eat in the plane.* She placed and gently pressed her right hand on her belly; limped a little. Mom suddenly looked behind and saw Mira.

“Are you okay?” she asked a little loudly.

Mira quickly drew her hand away from her belly and straightened her body. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You seem a little stiff... and awkward.”

“I’m just a little cold, that’s all.”

“Well, lucky you, we’ve reached the car now,” said Mom, pointing at the navy-colored mini-van. Printed on its front was *Chrysler*.

*Chrysler? I’ve never heard a car with that name before.*

“Do you wanna borrow one of my vests? I brought one with me, just in case you would need it.”

“Oh, no. I’m fine. I should start feeling warmer inside.”

“Okay. But let me know if you change your mind,” Mom said, then raising and waving her right arm to signal Mira to enter the vehicle.

“Thanks.”

Mira entered as soon as Mom and Tito Joey did. Mira saw them close their doors shut, so Mira tried to do the same. She held onto the bump on the door from the inside and began pushing the sliding door shut. The door was moving slowly, so Mira pushed harder. Harder.

“It won’t close,” she said painfully.

“Oh. It closes on its own, Mira.”

“What?”

“Try letting go, I mean.”

“Oh, okay,” she responded, immediately freeing her hands from the knob.

To Mira’s surprise, the door kept moving forward on its own, the gap getting smaller, until the door *clicked*, and then Tito stepped on the gas.



“Oh, and Mira?” Tito called.

“Po?”

“Don’t forget to fasten your seatbelt.”

“We’re not in the Philippines anymore. If over there it was fine not to fasten your seatbelt, it’s not over here. We can get fined for it,” Mom added. “And it’ll cost a lot of money.”

“Ah, okay,” she answered, quickly dragging the strap of belt from her right side. Mira felt safer and at ease after she heard the belt *click*.

“You should take a nap for now. We’ll wake you up when we get home,” instructed Mom.

It felt comfortable sitting there, and Mira was still feeling extremely tired from being on the plane, so she followed Mom.

“Thanks.”

She closed her eyes, found the leather seat in the van warm but slippery, too. But she slept through it, because she was just so exhausted.

## Laughter

When she was seven, Dad was seated on the green, torn-up couch and was watching the *24 Oras* news during dinnertime. She sat on the white cracked floor and placed her plate on the ground and grew curious at what Dad was watching. Mira saw and heard people – the Filipinos against the Philippine President of that time – as they protested, held signs like boards made out of cardboard boxes and pieces of woods. They moved, marched, yelled, and cried, out in the sun, in the heat, they stood. Mira’s eyes did not blink and she was slowly leaning towards and closer to the TV.

“Mira!” called Dad. “Eat your food.”

“Opo, dad,” she answered and, pulling her back, she sat up straight with her head down, but her eyes looked back at the TV.

She still watched, her eyes moved fast and followed the people’s signs. Mira knew there were words, but the camera moved too much that she could not catch the words faster. *Faster. Why do they look so sad and angry? Wherever the camera went, there were just the people. But where is Gloria Arroyo?* she wondered. She looked behind Dad with her mouth open and, after seeing Dad’s eyes locked on the TV, she quickly closed her mouth and, facing the TV once again, she slouched and looked back down to her food. Slowly and carefully, to her left, she glanced at Mom in the kitchen.

“Mom!” she suddenly yelled.

“Yes?”

“Mom... what should I study so I can become the President of the Philippines?”

Silence took over the house for a moment, and even the people from the TV seemed to be, when all of a sudden, laughter travelled from the kitchen to the living room until it made its way around the house. She eventually felt as if the house was laughing at her, too.

“What’s wrong?” Mira asked. “I just want to know.”

She looked behind to Dad and saw him staring at her with a serious face. His eyes were locked on her as locked as they were when he was watching the news. Mira’s feet felt cold. She looked at Mom again and saw her grinning while her hands covered her eyes. A few days after that, when Mira had just arrived home from her school, she pranced around the house to look for Mom when Mira suddenly heard Mom’s high-pitched voice coming out of the bedroom. She carefully opened the door, but only very little that seemed as though she was going to peek inside, but Mira’s stare was directed at the floor. As soon as she slightly opened the door, the words became clearer.

“And so she asked what she should study so she can become the President of the Philippines!!!” Mom said.

Mira quickly and carefully shut the door as she stepped back and away from it. She could still hear laughter. *She’s on the phone again with...Tita or Tito. What’s so funny about wanting to become the President of the Philippines?* Mira asked in her head. *What else can I do? There’s too much hate.*

## Brightness

April 27, 2014. When she first arrived at her new home in California, she could not see anything outside because it was already too dark. *12:04AM*. Mom opened a door and the darkness was illuminated. The lights appeared like floating giant torches which Mira would later learn were actually called chandeliers, but that the *ch* should be pronounced as *sh*. They lit up every corner and made each furniture so visible.

*So... this is what one of the houses in San Jacinto looks like.*

Mira was welcomed by a living room and a flat-screened TV. She looked to her right and away from the current living room. She was sure she saw another couch. She then hurriedly walked towards that direction and found another living room.

“Two living rooms? And two flat-screened TVs? Is it really necessary to have two living rooms and TVs?” Mira wondered out loud, her voice filled with surprise. “Aren’t flat-screened TVs really expensive?”

“The other one’s a family room, Mira,” Mom said.

Standing still, Mira saw past the living room a long and dark brown table with eight chairs. She ran quickly back to the family room to double check if she did not mistakenly already see a black, six-sitter table.

“Two tables? Two, again? Where do we really eat?”

“The one next to the living room is the formal dining room. That one beside the family room is the breakfast nook.”

“So we eat breakfast there?” *What’s a nook? Are these what really make up a house? A home? We actually have to eat at the table?*

Back in the Philippines, the entire house would be the size of the living and dining room, combined together, in San Jacinto. Mira would always be welcomed by a wooden bench, a 20-inch TV that stood above an old, ripped ottoman, and a small aluminum table. The kitchen had to be kept outside, behind the house. Otherwise, the entire house would smell like sautéed garlic and onions all the time if it were to be inside. Dad hung a tarpaulin above the stove so that the rain would not further rust the already-rusted stove. And yet here, an *exhaust fan* hung above a stove.

Mom showed her the bathroom downstairs and Mira was stunned. As soon as the door was opened, a wide mirror welcomed Mira, and Mom could clearly see Mira’s face. Both her eyes and mouth were so round, Mira could not close her mouth for quite some time. Mom’s eyes followed Mira around the bathroom. She turned on the faucets and, as soon as the water started running, she offered her palm to feel the water. *It’s so cold, and the water is crystal clear, no dirt nor rust visible.*

In the Philippines, dried water on the skin, especially after showering, feels as sticky as the humid air that blows to touch the skin when walking outside the house. After turning the faucets off, she looked to her left and saw a glass door where she could see through the shower room.

“Aren’t glass doors expensive?” she asked while looking at Mom. But Mom just shrugged her shoulders. Mira then turned around and studied the bathroom once more, but faster.

“It’s so clean. It’s so white.”

“Well it should be clean and bright. There’s another bathroom upstairs – two more, actually.”

“Really? How many bathrooms do we all need in one house? Isn’t one enough?”

“Not here.”

“Why?”

“Well, that’s how it is here. You’ll love it.”

Mom quickly showed her the way upstairs. And following Mom, Mira remembered to take off her shoes and socks and walk with her feet bare. As soon as she started walking up the stairs, she spent quite some time getting off of the stairs because she was feeling tickled on her feet.

*Carpet, dark brown, like coffee.*

“Why are the stairs and entire second floor on carpets?”

“Because they are.”

“Why?”

“They just are.”

Mira continued to follow Mom.

“Here we are. You’ll be using this,” said Mom while pointing inside a room with a white door. “You’ll share this with Kuya and Ate.”

“Another huge mirror! Two sinks? It’s so white here. And why is there another door inside this room?” asked Mira as she pointed to her left.

Mom walked straight and opened the door and flipped a switch on. Smiling, she quickly walked to the side and slightly raised her right arm, signaling Mira to come closer. As soon as

she got there, Mira saw, “A bathtub?” *Just like in the Western movies!* “Aren’t bathtubs expensive though?”

“Well, that’s how it is here.”

Mom walked out of the bathroom and Mira quickly followed her. “Where’s the second bathroom?”

Mom paused. “I’ll show you the other one next time. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. But why next time?”

“Because it’s in the master bedroom. It’s only for me and your Tito.” She then led Mira to another room right next to the bathroom.

“I’ll show you your room now. Ready?”

Mira nodded. She was standing behind Mom when Mom opened the door and walked straight right in. Mira was looking at Mom from behind. *Even after five years, she’s still taller than me.*

Mira stopped in front of what should be her room. She stared at the door, *white.*

Mom turned around. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” she responded, smiling, but with sadness in her eyes, “I’m fine.”

“Okay, then,” Mom said as she spread her arms wide, “Here it is!”

Mira took a step and leaned her body forward, her head past the door as she tried to peek inside from the outside. Across the door was a window, no curtains, but had white blinds. She saw a bed next to a window, *That’s where I’ll sleep.* She saw a little brown, wooden table next to

the bed, *That's where I'll put my phone before I sleep.* Across the bed, she saw a brown desk. *That's where I'll study.*

“Why don't you come inside?” asked Mom.

“Yeah.”

Mira finally walked inside, sat on the bed and stared at the desk, when all of a sudden, she felt someone's presence from her left side. She turned her head to the left only to find no one but herself. She stared hard and her eyes start to move around her image. Her long black wavy hair that covered her back shone more than usual because of the white jacket she was wearing. She stood up and realized, *I didn't really get any much taller.* She looked around what surrounded her image and was fascinated by the wall of mirror. Its borders of metallic gold made the mirror look as if it was like a picture frame. *What a huge mirror!* she told Mom. The mirror was divided into two: its left side appeared sunken while the right side stood forward. Mom walked closer to the mirror and stood in front of the right side. Mira was fixated on the left side of the mirror, but as Mom stood to the right, she could not help but glance. And Mira clearly saw how much Mom was still Mom and what changed.

*Her hair's still short, and she had always kept it short. Until now, I see how she still doesn't like the length of her hair to reach below her shoulders. The shape of her face changed, though. It used to look oval, but now her face looks really round and her cheeks chubby.*

Mom touched and held onto the metallic gold border and dragged it to the left – the left side then hid behind the right side. Mira's eyes became two perfect circles. Behind the wall of mirror, it was dark, but there was a floating white tube. Mira leaned forward and, upon a closer look inside, she noticed the floating white tube floated because its ends were stuck onto the



opposite sides of the walls. There were also white hangers hanging on the white tube on the left side.

“This is your closet. Keep your clothes in here,” Mom instructed.

“Closet? Its doors are made up of glass? Of mirrors? Isn’t the mirror too big? And doesn’t that mean I’ll have to see myself from head to toe every time before I sleep and wake up? Won’t I suddenly feel scared in the middle of the night, when it’s dark, and I get up from bed and I just see a shadow of what seems to be following me?”

“It’s just a mirror,” said Mom as she quickly closed the door. “You’ll be fine.”

She saw herself again and, standing a bit awkwardly, saw her seemingly confused eyes.

“Alright, then. I’ll leave you in here for now. It’s already 1AM. Good night, Mira,” says Mom softly as she hugged Mira.

Mira closed her eyes. “Good night, Mom.”

When the door finally closed, Mira sat back on the bed, but her shadowy reflection kept her uneasy. She stood up again. Very still, she stood, and Mira looked at the door and slowly turned right and, without stopping, slowly and carefully, she followed where her right shoulder seemed to lead the rest of her body, her sight landed on every object in the room. And she remembered as she turned, as if she was being twirled once, she imagined, by a friend she danced waltz with in Deparo High.

*Bright, but empty*, she thought. *Neat, but there’s nothing*. She closed her eyes and lifted her chin up. *Quiet. Alone*. Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw the ceiling *so white*. Mira went back to sit on her bed, but she put her feet up this time. She touched the pillow, *cold*, and grabbed and

hugged it. She pressed her face flat onto the pillow and, squeezing it, her eyes felt the pillow wet and grow warm. She finally saw how beautiful and different America was.

*And I'm only still in a house...*

When she was still in the Philippines, Mom would always tell Mira over at *Skype*, “You’ll love it here! It’s so beautiful, and you’ll have your own room. And of course, we’ll be together again!” *No kidding... extremely spacious rooms for each part of the house, really clean water, glass doors, and huge mirrors.* Everything seemed so clean to Mira, and every wall was painted white which made the entire house look so bright. But every time Mira closed her eyes, at each blink, she kept seeing Dad and the Philippines. *You’ll never get to stick your back to Dad’s back anymore, feel his warmth on you as it puts you to sleep. You won’t be able to hug him for a long time, no matter how much you miss his warmth nor his scent that smells like peppermint. That’s all he has with him now. His peppermint oils.*

*If I am dreaming, I want to wake up now.*

*K-Zone*

Back when Mira was in kindergarten, Mom had bought a huge blackboard for the siblings to have at home. Her eyes sparkled from the sight of it, and when she stood in front of it and touched it (and she remembers how she was just a little bit taller from the blackboard), she shut her eyes tight and jumped enthusiastically.

“Yay, yay, yay!” She felt lighter and felt the strands of her hair float. She felt little, glowing lights floating around her, and it made her day brighter than ever. Mira wore a huge grin on her face and exclaimed, “I want to become a teacher!”

The next day, Mira, whose stuffed animals she’s never touched at all, gathered all of them and lined them side by side, facing her. She then ran swiftly to their room and grabbed all of the *K-Zone* magazines Mom had bought for Kuya and Ate. Mom always said that reading them would make Kuya, Ate, and Mira know English well. *Why do we have to know English well?* Mira just loved looking at the pictures on the magazines that featured her favorite cartoon shows on Disney, like *Kim Possible*, *Martin Mystery*, and *Totally Spies*. She’d pile the magazines on top of each other and carried them with her. To Mira, they existed more than for reading. She handed each of her stuffed animals one *K-Zone*, carefully... perfectly she would place them in front of the stuffed animals, and Mira made sure the magazines were open, and she chose her favorite pages from each *K-Zone*. If the opened pages weren’t her favorite ones, she’d feel distracted. But once everything appeared to be in place to Mira, she would then pull, with great force, the blackboard closer until she found that it was perfectly at the center, facing her stuffed animals.

“Okay, class, let’s begin!”

## In Golden City

One of the stories she and the family always talk about goes back to when she was eight. The family would remember how she would always go over Kuya's backpack and Ate's desk – eagerly looking for some things in the drawers. She started collecting test papers of both her Kuya and Ate, and Mira kept them with her until Mom and Dad were home from work.

“Mom! Dad!” she would then yell, “Look! Do you see how much they've failed their exams?” She waved the papers high as she handed them to Mom. 75, 72, 77. The highest being 82. She felt relief whenever Mom scolded Kuya and Ate, but Mira never got what she wanted. The only things she would get were *sabunot* from Ate. Kuya would see Ate pulling Mira's hair so roughly, but Kuya didn't do anything. He would only be glaring at her. To Mira, they all did not understand why she was doing that and why she kept doing that. They all thought she was just being a nosy kid – which Mom and Dad would pat her head for. But, *no*, Mira could not say it. She would always bite her lips, despite having that look, every time, that seemed to say, *I wanna be in a good school, too.*

She was never really able to attend the best schools in the Philippines. She was the youngest, so it was only natural that she would receive the least from the family. Kuya and Ate were sent to the best, expensive ones since, after all, Mom and Dad could depend on them more in the future if they were to finish their studies from great schools. In Golden City, Santa Rosa, Mira only attended a really small private school that was inexpensive but was also still expensive enough that her family owed the school money. The school was only less than five minutes away from

home, and Mira knew the good schools were outside of Golden City and Kuya and Ate were always outside of Golden City. Every time Mira arrived at her school, she would stand outside, in front of it and stare at it for minutes. It looked like a house, a two-story house that was painted with dark blue and bright yellow. She would always look past through the grills and watch the students inside coming in and out of the rooms. For eight years, this was where Mira always was. She loved it there, the friends and classmates she already grew up with, but never the education and system.

“Mira!” called her teacher.

“Sir!”

“Listen. I’m not supposed to tell you about this, but...um,” looking down, he whispered, “Well, you finished second in class this academic year.”

“I did?!” gasped Mira.

“Yes. Yes, you did. But see, since you still have outstanding balances that have not yet been paid, we can’t allow you to walk up to the stage and hand you your awards. We would have to move up the ones who came below you instead.”

Mira’s smile slowly faded from her face. Her eyes that had appeared to have been lit by fire were suddenly drowning from tears and she remembered Sir looking as if he was drowning in water from above ground. She went home and learned that none of her family was home yet. Tears had already left her and they left her eyes unable to blink for a while. And while the others were still not home, she began to aimlessly go over Kuya’s closet and Ate’s desk for papers.

*How many more times?*

## No One

She was fourteen, a junior in high school when she moved to a public school - Deparo High School in the city of Caloocan. On her first day there, two weeks had already passed since the school had originally started its academic year. She felt so scared because it was her first time attending a public high school and she's starting later than everybody else. She thought, on her first day, on how she might get bullied. After all, there were a lot of rumors she had heard about public schools having so many bullies. But then she remembered, she used to go to a private school, a private school in which not a lot of students from public schools could afford to go to.

"Hey, what's your name? Where did you transfer from?" asked the girl who sat beside her from the seat she was assigned to by her teacher.

"Mira. I came from a private school in Santa Rosa, Laguna," she answered.

"You transferred from a private school? What's the name of your school?" asked the girl, bending her knees and sitting in a squat-like position, her eyes round and almost sparkling.

"International Montessori School. IMS for short."

"Wow! International? Oh my God, GUYS!" The girl stood up, rose her right arm and waved it high, calling everyone's attention in the classroom. She went from a private school!

She did nothing but smile even though she was bothered and scared then. But, *that's right*, she thought. Because she did come from a private school, it did not matter for them to know whether it was a big one or a small one. It did not matter if she had fees still unpaid even after moving. *No one here knows*. IMS – from its name, the school does not sound to be a small one at

all. The name embodied prestige and excellence, and it was located in the Golden City of Sta. Rosa. That was when she was able to disregard her fear. Mira thought about using her previous school as a tool that which can help her adjust and not get bullied. Though she was not that highly educated just like her new classmates, or they might had even been smarter than her, she used the fact that she came from a private school as a weapon to elevate and separate herself from the rest of them – even though the private school did not really live up to its name, *No one here knows*. After a week, she was friends with almost everyone in her class. In less than a year, she made friends with mostly everyone at school.



## Faces

On Mira's first day in college, she felt so anxious. Her hands and feet felt cold and sweaty during their entire thirty-five-minute drive from home to Moreno Valley College. She could not help but think how she will be intellectually inferior to the whites because they speak the English language in a daily basis – and Mira was going to be an English major and barely spoke English when she was still in the Philippines. *I wanna cry*, she thought. *Will my English be okay? What if someone asks me a question? I have to respond in English, I know, but how?*

When Mira arrived at school and entered the building of Humanities in Moreno Valley College, 324...324, she kept saying in her head. *Ah, found it*. She looked at the door and slowly lifted her left hand to reach for the doorknob. But as soon as she was about to touch it, her hand stopped right in front of the silver knob. *Voices*, she heard from behind her. She turned and saw, *the hallway, people sitting on the ground. Will they be in this class later, too?* Mira faced the door again and noticed, on its left side, a skinny rectangular window that stood upright, where she could see nothing through but darkness. *I guess that means the classroom's still closed*. She turned back around with her head down and, keeping her sight locked on the floor, Mira walked across the hallway and sat on the ground. *Carpet*, she thought and then touched the floor, *but it doesn't feel ticklish. Certainly not like the carpet in the house, on the stairs, in my room and everyone else's*. She zipped open her backpack and grabbed a white paper out. She looked at the printed letters and words on the white paper and read them out loud in her head. *CIS-1A. Introduction to Computer Information Systems. 3 Units. Thursday, 6:00PM-9:10PM, HM 324. J Kats – that's what my professor's name is, right? What does the J stand for? I might get scolded if I don't know my professor's first name. This is a more prestigious school than the ones I went*

*to in the Philippines. I can't get scolded now for not knowing my teachers' names. I don't want that... Should I ask? But I'd have to speak English then... Will it be alright? Maybe I'll just ask Ate for help later.*

*Keys? I hear keys. Keys jingling and hitting something. Mira finally lifted her head up.*

*This man is tall and white, skinny, a bit old maybe in his late 50s, white hair. He's taking out his keys – so many keys! – and unlocking the door.*

*Those black shoes that belong to the other man – oh, BIG, he's big. His skin, almost like mine, but a bit darker...hair, black and slightly shaved, TALL, he's too tall. Such a broad back.*

*And then another man... with such a pointed nose! SO TALL, too, with a lot of hair on his face! His arms are almost like the man in front of me, but this man seems to weigh less. They're all going into the classroom.*

*That's it, there's no turning back.*

*That man with the keys is standing in front of the white board. I guess he's my professor then. I need to find a seat.*

*Each table has its own computer though? And the monitors are flat? Aren't these a bit too much? In the schools I went to in the Philippines, there would never be so many computers in one room.*

*There are empty seats at the very end of the room. I'll just sit there and pretend to be invisible.*

*Lots of guys here with black hair, but they don't look Filipino.*

*“Good evening, class. Welcome to CIS-1A. Let me begin today's class by taking the roll.”*

*Roll? What does that mean?*

Mira's sight shifted temporarily to the professor, but she quickly returned them to her classmates. *They also don't look white, but their noses are pointed enough to be like the whites.*

"Alex?" the professor calls out.

*Where are they from?*

"Here!" the man with lots of hair on his face said out loud while raising his left hand. *I guess his name is Alex and that's what I have to do after I hear my name, Mira thought.*

"Cassidy?"

*Their skin is almost similar to mine, light skin...Here!...but can always turn brown when out in the sun for too long.*

"Dave?"

*How old are they though?*

"Here." *They don't look eighteen nor twenty. And some are big...*

"Edwin?"

*Others tall.*

"Here!"

*Will I be alright?* She drew out her hands and looked at her palms. *Cold. I feel cold.*

"Mira?"

*That's me!* "Here!" she exclaimed as she raised her right hand. "Ah," she muttered, pulling her hand back down. Mira stared at the dead computer monitor. She looked hard at her reflection and began to notice how she could see her face completely.

*He didn't see me, did he? The monitor's stand is too high, so I'm pretty sure he only saw my hand then. But whatever, that's fine. I'd prefer to not be seen anyway,* Mira thought with uncertainty.

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### The Message

It was dark in her room. Dark and cold, but a dim yellow light shone shyly from the corner of her room. The light extended to the ceiling which casted a shadow of sleeping Mira – her head so round and little and was faced sideways, while the rest of her body could not be traced as it hid under the dark. Touching the silky sheet of her bed, half of Mira's body felt cold, and the other half felt warm, for her furry blanket covered it. Mira was half awake, feeling bothered and uncomfortable by the cold, even though she had already been in Southern California for eleven months. *Ding*, she heard from somewhere on her desk. She reached for her cell phone and, after pressing a button, the light lit up her face. *5:45AM*. Her hair, a mess, her eyes, they looked like two short horizontal lines. She swiped down her screen and saw a message from someone in the Philippines. *Jess*, her stepbrother's wife.

*"Hi, Mira. Are you awake?"* printed on the preview of the message.

*I wonder what's up?* Mira thought. *This is my first time receiving a message from her.* She closed her eyes and continued to think. *Well, maybe she just needs to ask something... I guess I'll respond to her message later. I still wanna get some sleep.*

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She put her phone back down on the desk and turned her back against it. Half of her cold body started to feel warm, while the warm half of her body slowly started to feel cold. Mira closed her eyes tight. Tight. She started thinking about work and school.

*I've got three classes later in the day and five tutoring appointments. I wonder what my tutees will look like and be like later. Will I be able to speak well later and be at my best and not stutter? Will I be able to teach them properly? Cold. Why did Ate Jess message me?*

Mira pulled her blanket up until it covered her head, but her feet were no longer covered by the blanket and, they began to feel cold. She pulled her feet in and bent her knees, and her body, her thighs that then touched her chest made Mira look as if she was positioned like a fetus in a womb. She closed her eyes tight and tried to warm herself harder.

*Jess.*

Suddenly stretching out her body and sitting upright with force, she looked directly at her phone and stared at it as her left hand slowly reached for it.

*“Opo, Ate Jess. Why?”*

A few seconds passed. Then, a response:

*“Your dad’s in the hospital. He had a heart attack.”*

## Drops

*No...*

Warm tears seeped out of her eyes and travelled down her ice-cold cheeks as they slowly slid past her chin and fell freely in the dark air. The drops were caught directly and absorbed by her furry blanket. Mira held her phone tight, squeezed it hard, but not hard enough for her phone to break. She quickly jumped out of her bed and ran towards the door, opened it with force, and swiftly... ran on the dark hallway to get to Ate's room. As she stood in front of Ate's door, she closed her fist, pulled her right arm up, and, as soon as she realized she was almost going to punch her way in, she held back and gently tapped thrice on the door with her tiny fist pulsating with anxiety. She stood there with her left leg still and her right leg bending her knee again and again and again. The faint light that was coming from her phone showed her leg's movement as her foot's heel repeatedly patted the ground like moving it to the beat of some music. When Ate finally opened the door, Mira took a step forward and felt part of the carpet she was standing on cold and wet. Ate had a confused face and asked why Mira was crying. Mira heavily walked past Ate and went directly to her bed. She sat there and pulled up her phone. The light hit Ate's face that then revealed Ate's dark complexion and dyed brown hair. While Ate was walking towards Mira, Ate's eyes gradually became smaller the closer she got to Mira. She stopped right in front of the phone and, after a few seconds, stepped back with haste and placed her left hand on her mouth. She looked down and stood still. Her posture and silky straight, brown-dyed hair looked black, and in the darkness lightly lit, Mira shivered, her arms, the hair on her arms awoke, because Ate's state reminded Mira of Sadako, the ghost from a Japanese horror film.

It was already 6:30AM and Ate went back to her bed to sit. Mira walked on and past where Ate stood frozen, and she felt that part of the carpet cold and wet. Without saying nor exchanging words, Mira decided to leave Ate's room and go downstairs to start preparing for school. Mira walked slowly towards the stairs and, from the day's light that was shining through the windows of the house, she could see water dropping from her height to the carpet. It was like walking at the beach, she thought. *Light. Quiet. Peaceful.* But instead of leaving footprints on the sand, Mira was leaving tears on the furry carpet, leaving no visible marks and traces that she was there.

## Bearing

Mira was on her way downstairs, and the day's light was in her eyes' way when she found it difficult to walk down the stairs. She kept stopping and her vision kept getting blurry. She tried to wipe them away from her eyes, but her eyes only felt pain and so did her head. Mira safely got downstairs and she immediately went straight to the kitchen to prepare food to pack for lunch. But she stopped when she arrived at the kitchen. She stood frozen at the left side of the steel sink, *weak, my legs*, and she heavily placed her right hand on the countertop. *They won't stop!* she yelled only in her hand, but she still heard her voice. Placing her left hand on top of her head, *They won't stop*, she said again but heard a break in her voice. Her knees bent as she sat on the floor.

*I can't lose him yet. Not yet. Not yet!* she screamed. But no one heard her nor did it wake anyone. Tears endlessly fell from her eyes, like water does from a waterfall. But there was no stream beneath, just a white floor. *I still need him. I still do.* Mira sobbed and sobbed, helplessly, on the floor she sat, and her legs felt cold as they touched the white floor. But the cold didn't bother Mira anymore. Her head was down, and she placed her right hand on her chest and gripped her shirt tight. *It hurts... So much. Why am I away? Why so far away?* Mira's legs stayed still on the floor, but she gripped her shirt tighter and tighter as she kept lowering her head and body until the back of her right hand and her forehead touched the white floor. *I wanna go home.* But Mira suddenly got up and quickly leaned her body forward to reach out to the sink. Her stomach hurt, her head hurt, and her chest hurt. She gripped her shirt tighter as she opened her mouth. She felt something getting pulled from within her to her throat, but nothing came out, and she only felt pain stuck in her throat. Mira turned against the sink and felt like she couldn't



breathe, so she let go of her shirt. She looked at it and saw that it had wrinkled so much. The tears stopped, but she could still feel her face wet.

*Footsteps. I hear footsteps.* Mira wiped her face dry. She stood there still next to the sink until she saw whose footsteps she heard were from.

“Tito!” she exclaimed. She walked to him and gave him a hug. “Good morning. You’re up early today.”

“Good morning,” he replied as his hand stroke her back. “Yeah, I have to go to work today at Murrieta.”

“I see,” Mira answered as soon as she broke away from the hug. She looked down, but Tito still saw her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” was all it took for Mira’s tears to seep out of her eyes again.

“Dad had a heart attack,” Mira said as her voice broke. But this time she could hear it loud and clear, not only in her head. Mira couldn’t show Tito her crying face, so she went to hug him instead and hid her wet eyes from him on his left shoulder. And though Tito didn’t say anything back, he patted her back, and more tears only came out of Mira’s eyes. The pain came back to Mira and she felt it greater that time. Her legs felt much weaker than the weakness she felt from it earlier, but she didn’t fall down anymore.

“Oh...You should call to the Philippines,” Tito told Mira while he was still patting her back. “Use the house phone.”

“But wouldn’t we get charged a lot?”

“It’s fine. Just use it for however long you want and need.”

“Thank you,” Mira answered softly as she broke away from the hug. She gave Tito a smile, but tears still kept seeping out of Mira’s eyes.

“Are you okay?” Tito asked while placing his left hand on her right shoulder.

“Opo.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

Wiping her face dry and nodding, she answered, “I will.”

Tito gripped her shoulder before he let it go. “I’ll be going now, okay? But call me if you need anything. I’ll leave your mom a message, too.”

Mira nodded.

“Are you still going to your classes today?”

“Opo. I also have to work, so I can’t miss.”

“Are you sure? You don’t have to worry about not going. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. Make your call then, and don’t worry about the charges.”

“Thank you,” Mira answered. She waited for Tito to leave before she picked up the house phone. But before she picked it up, she only stared at it. *Pick it up now*, she thought and told herself, but her arms felt so heavy. *Why?*

*Ding*, she heard and saw her cell phone light up. Her arms suddenly felt light, and her right arm reached for her cell phone so quickly as though it didn’t feel heavy at all.

*Tita Rina. Dad's youngest sibling.*

*"Hi, Mira. I'm in the hospital with your stepmom."*

*"Can I call you on your phone, Tita?"*

*"Sure."*

Mira placed her phone down and moved her gaze to the house phone. Her right hand quickly reached for it, forgetting the heaviness that plagued it. Mira lowered her head, looked at the phone on her hand, gripped it tight, and closed her eyes.

*Please.*

## The Woman

Six months had already passed when Mom finally decided to tell Dad that she went to America. All Kuya, Ate, and Mira heard from what they were told was that Dad cursed Mom. And upon learning that Mom left not only home but also their country, Dad hurried back home. Mira remembers the first thing Dad talked about to her, Kuya, and Ate on their first night of getting back together again.

“Can I ask your stepmom to come live with us here?”

“Yeah,” Mira immediately responded and then bit her lips as she looked to Kuya. The word slipped right out of her mouth again.

Kuya rested his elbows on the table, folded his hands together, and placed his chin above them. “If that’s what’ll make you happy,” he said.

Nodding, Ate said, “We’re fine with it.”

The night had just fallen when Kuya, Ate, and Mira started playing ping pong in the yard. It wasn’t soon until the light yet loud tapping sounds the ball produced as it travelled across the table were overtaken by the *traysikel’s* engine as it roared; the plastic chair screeched as its legs shook after being dragged on the ground when Dad’s weight left it; the loud clink of the gate’s metallic bars. Mira’s eyes followed Dad, and so did Kuya’s and Ate’s. They could see Dad in his white t-shirt and black short as he stood there in front of the gate from inside the house, but they had to stare harder to whom Dad was speaking to because it was too dark outside the house, and

the stranger was taken over by the darkness. But they finally heard the voice — *dry... but soft. and sweet.* It was after hearing the stranger’s voice that the siblings learned that their visitor was a woman.

Dad stepped back and, as soon as the woman walked in to the house, the darkness left her. Smiling and waving, she looked at the siblings. Her black hair was as short as Mom’s shoulder-length hair — but the woman’s was straight and falling freely, Mom’s wasn’t straight but wavy. And their faces... Mom’s was slim but her cheeks were always so round, and they especially showed when she’s smiling. *They say I look and smile like her.* The woman’s cheeks weren’t the same, and her face wasn’t slim. She had a sharp round face with deep eyes that hid behind her rectangular, metal-framed glasses. *What would Mom look like with those glasses?* Dad waved to the siblings and called them over.

“Her name’s Ding, but you can call her *Udi.*” Dad said while pointing at the woman beside him.

“Hello po,” the siblings politely responded and smiled.

“Hello,” the woman greeted back shyly.

Mira slowly moved her gaze from the woman’s face to the woman’s body and overall stature. *She’s slightly taller than Mom, but it’s not just that,* Mira wondered as she looked back at the woman’s face. They looked completely different from each other despite being both women and mothers. She then saw how the woman was looking at her, too, smiling. Startled, Mira smiled back and quickly looked away.

The woman started living with them and sleeping in the same room with them. Most of the days, since Kuya and Ate were always at school from morning till evening, Mira was left in the house with Dad and Udi. But because Mira didn't feel like staying in the house, she often went out with her friends later in the afternoons.

"My friends will come pick me up later, Dad, for a group study... (but of course, that's not what we'll be doing. We'll be watching a movie at Maan's house)."

"Sure, anak," Dad immediately responded. "What time will you be back?"

"6PM."

"Just text me where you are, okay?"

"Always (I don't want you to worry anyway)."

Mira would run with haste to the gate as soon she'd hear her friends' voices.

"Hey, guys!" exclaimed Mira.

"Hey, Mira!" They responded lively. "Who's that lady? one of her friends asked, pointing at Udi.

"Ohh. Her? She's my, uh, she— she's my aunt."

"Aunt?"

"Yeah. Ma— my dad's sister," Mira responded, scratching her head gently. "So where are we guys going?"

"Is she living with you?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

Mira would leave the house and walk away with her friends, but she'd look back at the house once she knew she was out of Dad and Udi's sight.

*It's dangerous outside, Mira. Don't leave the house.*

*You're not here... not here.*

## I See You

Shaking, Mira began pressing buttons on the phone. +, 6, 3, 9, 1, 7, 3, 2, 9, 9, 5, 1... 4. She stared at the phone on the sweating palm of her freezing hand and gasped when she felt a slight vibration from it and faintly heard a ringing sound. She could never forget how it felt and sounded like the rumbling of the sky before a storm. With haste, Mira placed the phone on her ear and swiftly walked round and round in circles in the kitchen. *Ring... ring... ring...* Round and round she walked. *Ring... ring... ring... The gaps between these rings had never ever felt this long.* She slightly raised her other arm to let her hand touch her cheek, but the tips of her fingers felt cold. She dragged her fingers from her cheek across her face and bit onto her thumb when it touched her lips. She could hear herself breathing, and the tip of her thumb could feel her breathing. *What's taking them so long to answer? Should I just not call...?* Mira was about to end the call when she suddenly heard the speaker crumpling, and then...

“*Hello?*” the speaker softly and gently spoke.

“Hello po, Tita Rina?”

“Hi, Mira. I’ll pass my phone to Udi so you can talk to her.”

“Salamat po, Tita.”

“Mira,” she heard. The voice seemed bigger than usual, but also weaker, tired, breaking.

*Is it the reception?* “Hello po, Udi?”

“I don’t know how to tell you Mira, I don’t even know what I’m supposed to tell you, I don’t know... we were just working.”



Mira could hear the rush in Udi's voice, and that constant whooshing, the sound of thick air coming from the speaker that disturbed Mira greatly.

"Slow down, Udi. Tell me... How did it happen?"

"What are we gonna do? We don't have money, Mira..."

"What happened?"

"...we were working. We were working..."

"Where is he right now?"

"...and then he just fell down. He fell down and..."

Mira clasped the phone and pulled it away from her ear to her eyes. *Hold it in. Hold it in. How can I calm her down?*

Mira stopped walking around in circles and started to think about how to calm down her stepmom. But she couldn't think straight and, knowing her stepmom, Udi was never the kind of person who calms down easily. She *is* always worried.

Mira sat down the floor, placed the phone back to her ear, and continued to listen to Udi.

"...I didn't know. We don't have money and the hospital wouldn't take him in even when we went there and he was already dying. They'd never take him in. I had to call your aunts and take a chance. We know they're not in good terms, but he could die. I don't have anything, Mira."

"I'll be sending you money. I have savings from my work, Udi. I'll send weekly. Where is Dad right now?"

“I-C-U,” Mira heard loud and clear, as if Udi told her, “I see you.” “The doctor came out just a few minutes ago, Mira,” Udi continued. “He told us your dad only has 24 hours left. If he doesn’t recover within 24 hours, they can’t do anything for him, for us, anymore. It’s all up to your dad now. What should I do, Mira?”

“I..”

The edges of Mira’s lips felt extremely heavy that she could not open her mouth no matter how much she wanted to reply. There was so much to say, but nothing came out. Her lips felt stitched. She sat still on the cold floor in the laundry room, the phone on her sweating palm remained glued to her ear. Mira covered her face with her hand, but she was careful not to let it touch her lips.

## Mom's Day

It was the night before Mother's Day, and a month-and-a-half had already passed since Dad's heart attack, when Kuya, Ate, and Mira went out together to buy some snacks at Stater Bros.. While Mira and Ate were occupied with searching for food, Kuya went across the food stalls to the flowers'. Dragging his hand across the colorful field of flowers, he grabbed a bouquet and walked back to Ate and Mira. The three of them walked to the stall of greeting cards, looked for a Mother's Day card, and chose one that had lots hearts printed on the card.

"Awww... Mom will be really happy," said Mira.

"I know! It's our first time to celebrate Mother's Day with her again after five years!" Ate joyfully responded.

Mira glanced over at Kuya and noticed that, though she and Ate were smiling to Kuya, Kuya had but an expressionless face. When they arrived home, Mom was at the kitchen and was standing next to the silver dishwasher and was wiping her hands clean with a small brown towel. Kuya suddenly began to walk towards Mom, and, Mira and Ate who were left behind, stared blankly at each other.

"Happy Mother's Day!" yelled Kuya.

"Happy Mother's Day!" followed Ate and Mira. They both walked behind Kuya, went to Mom, and hugged her tight.

"Oh! Thank you so much," she said, her voice soft and breaking.

On the morning of Mother's Day, Mira and Ate were sitting on the formal dining room and were studying and excessively smiling, waiting for Mom to come downstairs.

"I wish Kuya took the day off from work today," said Mira.

"I know. It could be happier if all of us were here," Ate replied.

"Footsteps!" Stretching her left hand and reaching it to tap Ate's shoulder, "I hear footsteps!"

And they both saw Mom walking downstairs still in her pajamas. Mira and Ate both ran and raced towards Mom, but Mira got to Mom first and she hugged her tight.

"Happy Mother's Day, Mom," she said with a soft and gentle voice.

"Thanks," said Mom while breaking away from the embrace. "So where's my gift?"

Mira's smile faded, but she wore it again and looked into Mom's eyes; but the smile returned only to disappear once more.

"What?"

"My gift."

Mira looked at Ate.

"We gave it last night," answered Ate.

"No. Those were just flowers and a card that had none of your writings," said Mom while slowly raising her voice. "Let's go upstairs and talk."

Mira and Ate had both of their heads down and, standing behind Mom, followed her upstairs. They were lined up like children going to recess. Mira's head stayed down for a moment, and her gaze that was fixed on the furry carpet shifted to Ate who was behind her. She looked confusedly

at Ate and, looking up to Mira, Ate only shrugged her shoulders. When they finally made it upstairs, Mom stopped right in front of the master bedroom's and turned to face Mira and Ate. Ate stood and placed her back against Mira's bedroom door, while Mira stood right next to the stairs, across her bedroom and in front of Mom's. But a tall brown bookshelf stood between the master bedroom and Mira's room, and it prevented Ate to see Mom just as it prevented Mom to see Ate. It was only Mira who could see Mom's furious face and watch Ate whose back was attached on Mira's door. Sliding her back down on the door, Ate slowly made her way to sit on the carpet. Their eyes met, Ate was looking up to Mira, and when Mira returned her eyes to Mom, the conversation began.

"It's because of your father, isn't it? Tell me I'm right, Mira."

"I guess... if you want to look at it that way," she answered softly. "But no."

"Then why?" asked Mom, her voice high.

"I just—" Mira said while she glanced to her left over at Ate.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" Mom interrupted. "The money you're sending to your father, it looks like you're sending your Tito's money. You're here because of your Tito. Everything you do and earn here is because of your Tito. So if you're giving money to your father, that's you giving your Tito's money to your father."

"But..."

"No. Are you really not going to listen to me? If you wanna help your father out that badly, and you're going to completely ignore my presence as your mother, why don't I just send you back to the Philippines? GO! Pack up! I'm sending you back to the Philippines."

Mira looked down to Ate, but Ate was silent, her eyes just fixed on Mira. “But you can’t just \_”

“I can just tell the US Embassy that my own daughter is giving me a headache so I want to send her back to the Philippines.”

“Why?”

“Because you keep sending your dad money when he hasn’t even given you anything! I’ve been giving you everything!”

“The reason why I didn’t buy and give you a present was because... I thought... I thought that the greatest gift you can ever have this Mother’s Day is for me, Kuya, and Ate to all be here, present and with you, after five years of not being able to be with you and spend this day with you... Dad has no one back there and he’s still recovering in the hospital.” Mira choked and finished with a broken voice. “We’re all here.”

*This is what happens when you have a broken family. You’re broken, too. While you’re physically here in America, you know only half of you is here. You intentionally left your other half in the Philippines because Dad’s there. And you grew up there.*

## Shattered

The war inside the house lasted for eleven years. But there was no blood, at least no one bled externally, because the wounds did not reside on their skin, but were rather in their flesh, in their hearts, ones that could not be healed by means of any medicine. Just acceptance.

Mom and Dad kept fighting, constantly yelling at each other. She could not remember anymore what they were fighting about, because they fought so much, too many times, it's hard to remember how and why. If she were to take a guess, she thinks it was about Dad's affair(s).

In the middle of the night, Kuya, Ate, and Mira would always be awakened by Mom's extremely loud voice.

"Again? Where were you, really? Why?" And Mom's voice always broke whenever she asked Dad why. But there were times when her voice didn't break, and when it didn't break, they would hear Mom scream "Ha! Punyeta!" and what followed were the heavy sounds of bodies hitting each other. It was always dark, and Mira feared the darkness. And that one time Mira heard the heavy sounds, she jumped out of her bed and, carrying her blanket with her, ran outside of the bedroom.

"Stop!" she yelled with tears in her eyes. She saw Mom and Dad hitting each other. She saw, and Mira's legs felt weak. She dropped on the floor, crying, "Stop!" as she hugged her blue, Mickey Mouse blanket tight.

"Shut up, Mira!"

“No!”

“Shut up!”

Harder. She held onto her blanket harder as she looked down to it with her tears helplessly falling on the images of Mickey Mouse. Mom always had a hunch, but Dad denied, dismissed, and fought against Mom’s accusations every time. Mom was always right, however. Dad loved Mom. They all knew that. Whenever Mira was with Dad, he would always place his hand on top of her shoulder, lean close to her, and say, “I love you, anak. You, Ate, Kuya, and Mom. I love you all very much.” But there was something wrong with their relationship that Dad felt the need to be loved by another woman – or other women.

*Was Mom not enough? Were we not enough? What was wrong with us?* Mira felt like she was struck through her heart by a sword. She felt like bleeding, but she didn’t. She wanted to, but she couldn’t. She saw the glass as it magically flew from Mom’s direction to Dad, and she watched the glass fall from Dad’s back to the white, cracked floor. She watched the thick white glass as it shattered on the ground. She looked at its pieces – some big, some small, others were too tiny that she could barely see them. She looked anyway, and her crying stopped. On the floor, the pieces were sparkling like diamonds of different sizes, and she found them beautiful. *How come?* she wondered. *It’s already broken, and yet it shines brighter than when it was whole.*



## Pillars

*Crushed.* Something's *crushing* her. She's laid there on the bed one night, hidden underneath the blanket with the lights off, when she pictured the house in her head.

*A dark gray, two-story house. On the left and middle, the white one-car and two-car garages. And pushed back on the right side of the house is the white double, front door where, above it, a room with a large square window keeps the space for the front door shaded away from the sun's light. That's my room. The middle, as well as the left side of the house, also had large square windows from the outside. The middle is Ate's room, and it sat above the two-car garage. Kuya's room is on the left side and above, too, of the garages. I feel like I'm floating.*

She closed her eyes and she felt a spark in her head, as if she was electrocuted, and then pain in her chest. She remembers. Memories bring pain. *I did not know what it was, and yet it happened to me. I didn't even know what it was, and yet it still happened to me. I was used because I was innocent. I was used, and I only feel ruined. Betrayed. No one here knows.*

She could hear bursts of laughter from outside of her room. She opened her eyes and thought, *No one here knows. No one still does.* Her eyes became wet and tears fell out of them without her consent. She closed them and felt warm.

*Life will keep on going. I look to the window, see that it's night, and even if I'm gone, the sun will still come. Laughter still will. Joy, sadness, tears still will. Clocks will still keep ticking, waters running. Flowers, trees. They'll keep growing. Nothing would ever really stop. Just a heart from beating and a brain from thinking. From remembering and feeling.*

*I think of home and I see Philippines. But I'm not there, there where my innocence was lost. And when I lost it, what had I become? I was neither on fire nor ice. Was I even something in innocence? I continue to think of Home, and then I see Mom in my head, and I'm here. But am I really home? Home... where no one knows. I'm in the corner of the house. I hear laughter, and there's nothing underneath. The corner feels heavy, and I feel like falling as my head makes me watch the corner, my room, being sliced away from the rest of the house.*

*Dad, Alan, Evan, Maddie, writing, my professors...*

*Don't I want to become one? Don't I want to write? If I go, no one would skype Dad every night, and his heart might stop beating for ever. And I don't want them to lose a friend even though they have a lot. The memories would stop. Memories with them. So I can't, can I?*

*Memories bring pain. And it is when I drown in them that I wonder, "What am I?" I breathe, and I breathe, and I breathe. Surely, there's got to be something. I carry a shovel heavier than me, taller than me, and I dig. I'm stained and continue to dig. Digging, harder until I faintly hear chatter. Laughter. Dig. Dig. Dig. Dig until a light starts to strike through the soil. I let go of the shovel. I dig with my hands. Let the soil be buried in my fingernails. Dig... and I see them. I smile and look at my hands. Unstained. Memories bring pain, but not only pain. In the midst of all the pain, I hear laughter, I see joy, and I feel comfort and happiness. Memories make me want to make some more memories. I see who I want to be and reminded why. I find underneath the soil, the light, the people I love, and I cling to that sight... and feelings arise... and they pull me away from the dark, into the light. How then can I ever curse the world, or the God, if He ever does exist? How can I, from just one man and having a broken family, when I was given other people? Other people who have become my dear peers and mentors – who have become the reason. I don't feel like falling anymore. After all, though the bottom of my room is empty,*

*there are two white pillars underneath, on each end, that, from the outside, make and keep my room from falling. And I find comfort inside because I remember that.*

She pulled up her blanket to cover her head, but her feet were left open to and uncovered from the night. She pulled her legs up and closer to her until her thighs... and then her knees... touched her chest. She closed her eyes and tears travelled down to her silky bedsheet. *To those of us whose lost because we were used, and whoever feels like falling from that or whatever, I hope and pray that we can all find our reason. I hope we'll all come to feel and realize that no one is truly alone. Dig until you're not alone.*

## Bubbles

When Mom left for America, Kuya and Ate weren't always home in the days, and they started unusually being home later in the evenings. She was often alone in the house and she didn't always feel like going out with her friends. After all, Mom didn't really want her to be out. She'd remember that Mom would always say, *It's dangerous out there; it's dangerous to be outside, and you're just a little girl.* So she locked herself in the house, watched TV, played with her imaginary friends. But sometimes, she couldn't keep her imaginary friends alive for long. Not anymore. When Mom had just left, after Dad left home, after getting kicked out for cheating, the knowledge and awareness of not having any of her parents around slowly crushed the eleven-year-old. She'd sit on the corner of the green torn-up couch in the living room, offer her forehead to its armrest, and cry. Her tears would always touch the skin of the couch, and they would slide all the way down to a dark line and fall into the innards of the couch. She never lifted her head up until she was done crying.

But there was that one time she lifted her head up while she was still crying. She just had to get up since she felt air, force, and pain in her stomach. It kept pushing itself out from her stomach to her throat, so she forced her mouth shut. It kept pushing... *I can't breathe...* She placed her hand on her chest and, as soon as she felt her heart beat, she began pounding her chest with her palm. *Stop, stop, stop.* But it just won't. She held her face, her palms on her cheeks and then on her head, fingers locked tightly on the strands of her hair. *I'm so tired.* She closed her eyes and, as soon as she opened them, everything else seemed blurry, like she was sitting in a car in the middle of the road, in the middle of a storm, and the wipers were broken. *I can see, but I can't see anything.* She looked around her and thought she saw a black stick that was resting on

top of a brown glass table. She knew it was a pen. Her grip loosened and her fingers slipped through the strands of her hair. She rubbed her fists on her eyes and then reached out to the pen. She searched through her backpack for a blank paper, took it out, and, still crying, she held on tightly to the pen and started writing. *Write, write, write...* the paper soon filled with words and tears, and she never stopped writing; not until the stream of tears deserted her face.

*All this time, I've had this lingering feeling. Every day, I feel empty, like there's a hole in my heart, and then I'd feel like writing, and then I write, and then the hole is being poured with cement. After I cried, after I wrote, the poured cement dried and I felt whole again. But the feelings of emptiness didn't begin there, no. It began when my parents separated...and when my siblings and I dispersed. It was like bubbles were blown away to float freely unto the air. But three bubbles in particular seemed to be dancing their way around the air, and I watched them. They looked like glass; extremely thin but sparkling. The reflection of the day's light even appeared to have given them different colors inside. Rainbow-like. But there was that smallest bubble that, slowly and surely, drifted down and apart from the bigger two. It just wouldn't float away, and its rainbow became less visible the closer it got to the ground. Slowly. Slowly did it continue to float downwards until it popped and left its mark on the ground.*

She would drop the pen, close her eyes, and look up as the last drop of tear travelled down and past her cheek.

## Balance

“How does it feel? When it comes back.”

“It’s like, you’re in a plane. Sitting upright, the light is on your face and you eat your snacks, you smile, and await for something great when you land. But all of a sudden, your seat shakes and the whole plane shakes. The lights go out. You panic. You spread your arms and your hands hold onto sides of your seats. You bend your body until it touches your thighs... You’ll feel warmth somewhere in between, but your feet are cold from anxiety. From the fear of the unknown. The plane shakes and dives down to the unknown, and the pressure makes your chest touch your thighs even harder. You get pulled harder, but your chest can’t get any closer to your thighs, so you’ll feel your heart getting pulled out of your chest. But your bones, your skin won’t let your heart out, so the pressure continues to pull it, pinches the center of your heart to take even just a piece, small chunk of it out. You cry. Cry... Scream, “No! Stop!”

“What do you feel like you want to do, when it comes back?”

“Ask to be saved.

Because it will hurt to feel like falling. To think that you’re alone.

And one can only take so much pressure... so much pain.”

“What do you mean by ask *to be saved*?”

“I’m tired. I’m tired of feeling all these by myself. I feel like it just keeps dragging me down no matter how much I try to lift myself up. I’m always feeling lonely at the end of the day, when

I'm finally in my room, in the dark, laying on my bed. There's so much going on in the dark. And I don't wanna drown in the dark."

"What are you trying to seek by coming here? Or by simply coming out?"

"I just want to find my balance."

"What do you mean by *balance*?"

"For more than ten years I've kept this all to myself. I didn't tell anyone. Not even from the moment I found out what it was that happened to me. Before I learned of it, my parents were fighting most of the time, and when I finally found out, they had already separated, so there were a lot of other things going on in the house, in my family. My siblings had also left our house after our parents separated, so I had no one by then, and I became busy adjusting to the new chapter in my life. But now that I'm here in America and there's been a lot about the Philippines that I keep coming back to, or thinking back to, this memory, this secret that had always been in the back of my head, has finally put itself on the top of my list. To face. And now that I'm also in the age of falling in love, and I am in love, I didn't think I'd be imprisoned by the memory that I have so long tried to forget by ignoring its occurrence. I didn't think I'd be haunted in a time when everything is supposed to be blossoming."

"I understand. How do you think you can find this 'balance' that you are trying to seek?"

"Uhhh... *I was thinking you'd have the answer to that...*

It feels like I have two sides of me right now. The jolly, cheerful me that everyone sees. Always smiling... laughing. But when I'm alone, it's like I become one with the dark. I guess what I'm trying to find is how I can just be both at the same time, especially when I'm in public, because

it's exhausting to keep smiling when I'm actually crying inside. Every morning, I look in the mirror, and I see myself, and I smile to me, but then, while nobody sees the mirror is cracked, I see them, the cracks, and my face becomes reflected in a variety of fragments. I look damaged. Broken. And I'm tired of this – ignoring my darkness in the light of the day. I wanna be happy knowing that I am actually sad inside. I wanna be sad knowing that it's okay to be sad, and I won't be sad all by myself, because I can talk to people. People who I can trust. My best friends.

“What is it that you envision when you speak of *balance*?”

*These are some tough questions... I came here because I thought you could help me find answers...* “Going back to what I was saying earlier about me having two sides, I just want both to be visible. I feel like that's what I mean about balance.”

“What do you mean by both being visible?”

“... picture the crest of yin and yang. Half is white, light, and the other half is dark. And they both seem equal. But not only equal. They're both very visible. Touchable. But no matter how visible and touchable they are, their balance is maintained. Unshaken. I have two stories about me before I immigrated here. The first one is that I come from a broken family – the one everyone knows about – the lit one; and the other is being a victim of sexual abuse – the one I've kept a secret, hidden in the dark for more than ten years. And I think I just want everyone to know that I'm not just from a broken family. This is only a half of my truth. A half of my identity. Everyone only sees half of the picture. And I feel fake. Empty. Just something inside me does not feel right... incomplete.

I am a victim of sexual abuse.

Just as I am a Filipino in America.



I cannot hide these facts.

And I think I've just learned to accept this, because I know it's something I can never erase, even though I feel like I'm about to break into tiny little pieces every time I have nightmares about it, when I was hiding it, and even now with talking about it. And I still do hide it. From my family."

"When you say 'victim,' isn't it better to call yourself a 'survivor'? I mean, you survived the abuse. The suffering."

"Did I?"

"So you don't see yourself as a survivor?"

"How can I call myself a survivor if I'm still reliving the experience as I speak of it with you right now?"

"That's a tough question. Are you implying that, though you've lived through your victimization, you're still unable to call yourself a survivor, even if living through victimization follows surviving the victimization?"

"What I think I'm trying to say is – or how I'm at least feeling – is that there is no such thing as a survivor. 'Survivor' has a very strong victorious connotation. But victory is not easily achieved nor reached. Behind a victory is the suffering, and this is all what we remember the most. When we remember the suffering, all of the pains return, and when they return, it feels like the sufferings occurred so very recently, no matter how long ago they've been experienced – and this is even if we're at the point of victory already. I cannot dismiss the fact that I inevitably relive the sexual abuse I was subjected into. And this is why the word *trauma* exists, right? Reliving certain experiences is inevitable, unless they were to be erased from our memories – but

that, in itself, is problematic, because they're essential to who I am, who I've become. So what I'm really trying to say is... I am a victim from the moment it happened to me, and I will continue to be until the day I die. Living alongside it, through it, not choosing to commit suicide, is my reality. It's what I have to do so I can keep on living. But see, I cannot associate living with surviving, in my case, because I am not ever not haunted. The truth is, even though I am capable of feeling happy, very happy, I'm still always suffering, so I don't see how that's victorious at all. But it is an illustration of resiliency."

"Right. I see where you're coming from, and I really appreciate that you're strong, firm, with what you believe in."

"Hiding it for more than ten years, I had done a lot of thinking. I had no one to speak to, so I could only run to myself and know that I would always have my back more than anyone else would. But I also now very much appreciate and value the best friends I have made who have been making me stronger. Talking to them helps me so much, so it's important to have friends, but we should all know that it is also important to have our own selves, too. It's what I've learned to believe in."

"Yes, you're certainly right. Well, thank you so much, Mira. How was this experience for you? I recall you telling me that you never considered counseling before. Or you thought it absurd to go."

"No, thank you, because I am actually quite surprised about how much more I could talk so easily concerning my experiences. I mean, of course they're never easy topics to talk about, but the questions you've raised, they were questions I've asked myself and wanted to be told answers. But I'm really surprised to know that I had the answers I've been looking for in me

already. This conversation we just had, I think, really triggered the answers to come out of my mouth, and I'm glad that the words just came out of me as if I had talked about this more than I have already, because I really haven't. I'm glad I was hearing them all and not just in my head – I mean I don't hear myself thinking, but I'd always be zoning out and just... thinking... it's hard to say specifically about what, but I think you know what I mean.”

“Yes, definitely. Well, I'm really glad to hear that, Mira! I hope I have been a big help—”

“OH, yes! You certainly have, and thank you so much. I always thought it would be more difficult to talk to a counselor, since you are a stranger to me, I'm sorry... but it turned out to be easier for me to speak which is so weird.”

“Thank you so much. It's also all because of your resiliency. You are very brave. I'm really glad you're here, and I deeply appreciate your responses.”

“I'm glad, too, that I'm here. Definitely one of the best decisions I've made in my life. I didn't expect I'd have such a positive counseling experience. Thank you so much.

Please expect to be seeing me a lot in here.”

“You're very welcome. And yes, please. Come back whenever you need and want to come back. I'm just right here.”

## Gaze

As soon as she stepped out of the door, the afternoon sunlight suddenly shone on her and almost burned her eyes. But her teary eyes immediately extinguished the flames that the sun attempted to instigate, and she raised her arm, let half of her hand land on her forehead, so that her palm shaded her eyes. She walked and left with her head down, her gaze locked on the concrete ground as she began to reflect on the conversation she had with her counselor. as she had to relive her victimization. as she began to remember It happened at the time when Mom and Dad were constantly fighting before they finally decided to separate. when she couldn't tell anyone around her what had been happening...until she immigrated. It's as if she didn't bring her wall with her from the Philippines to America. When she turned to another road which made the sun shine on her back, she lifted her chin up and looked to the sky.

*I've always worried so much about being different. But when I finally chose to write, talk about why I feel so different, the more I confront my past, the more I open up, the more conversations I have, the more I read, the more I write – the more I started to feel less different. I thought I was looking for a place for me, but I wasn't actually looking for a place for me because that place already exists. The only piece that I was missing in the picture I always envisioned was my self. When I finally started reaching out, letting people in, everywhere wasn't just a place anymore but became home, even when I always told myself that my only home is Philippines. Now, Philippines is just one of my homes – my first home. The friends I grew up with who I will never forget...Mary, Vill, Anali, Shaira, Paolo, Maan, Eljay, Howard, Lowell, John Ross...my last set of friends before I immigrated... Jorina, Rosielyn, Mariel, Lilibeth, Neil,*

*Kevin, Jerome, Joshua, Jade, Maki, Kenneth Antiado and Martinez, Aldrian... my class sections of Dagohoy and Newton for the last two years of my high school in the Philippines.*

*To my friend I used to call Kuya – Ridge Elijah T. Villan. I think about the last time I spoke to you and the time I found out that I can no longer talk to you. It's crazy how a bullet that is made to protect is the one that eliminates who is supposed to be protected. I saw them change their pictures on Facebook: "Justice for Ridge." But what is Justice? I think of Philippines, I see my friends, I think of my victimization, I think of It happening there, here, around the world... It's scary to be under the sun – which is why I always look up to it, and I know it's the same sun I had been looking up to back in the Philippines and over here in California, because it could still hurt my eyes even though it's also able to calm me sometimes.*