

A Contract Overseas

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Mia Alvar is the winner of the 2016 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction for In the Country: Stories. Her debut collection sheds light on the Filipino diaspora, with each story following the various journeys of men, women, and their families as they leave their homes in search of a new, but not always better, life abroad. The heart of these stories can be found in their exploration of universal themes such as displacement, the desire for human connection, loss, and, ultimately, hope. The following is a story from the collection.

When I was in high school, long ago, my brother Andoy used to drop me off and pick me up from campus in a Cadillac. It wasn't his, of course, any more than the rented uniform I wore was mine. And certainly we weren't fooling anyone: not the neighbors in our barangay, not the nuns who'd given me a scholarship to their convent school in San Lorenzo. The car belonged to the family my brother worked for, as a live-in chauffeur. Each morning, Andoy woke before they did, put on his gloves and trousers in the dark, and drove from the suburbs to the slums to collect me. He'd already be muddling through traffic on EDSA Boulevard by the time I rose and got into my own X-shaped necktie and school girl pleats.

Our mother was the one who washed and starched and pressed my uniform each night, as if that would fool the sugar heiresses and Senate daughters at my school into mistaking me for one of their own. Andoy knew better. Every morning, in the car, he gave me money for the school canteen and ate the bag lunch our mother had packed. He paid the dentist who filled my cavities and the orthodontist who straightened my teeth. On weekends we saw movies or played records on our father's old phonograph, so when my classmates squealed over Leif Garrett or the Osmond Brothers, I'd know enough to squeal along.

I graduated in 1976, the same year that Andoy was fired from his driving job. His employer's daughter, Ligaya, had just turned eighteen, and she and Andoy had been caught "celebrating" her birthday in the backseat of her father's car. With Andoy unemployed and my mother scraping to feed us, I couldn't go straight to college, even with a scholarship. We both spent the next twelve months mopping floors and stocking shelves to scare up rent and some tuition. I didn't see an end in sight till Andoy told me, in May of 1977, that he'd found a better job.

"This time I want an Eldorado convertible," I said. We'd just stepped off the jeepney on Salapi Road, whose pavement ended half a mile or so before our *barangay* began. Along with his old job, of course, we'd lost our access to the Cadillac. It depressed me to be riding jeepneys again, sardined thigh to thigh with strangers in a steel caravan painted up in circus colors, sometimes so crowded that brave young boys sat on the roof or hung on to the jeepney's sides, the plastic-tarp "windows" flapping against them. After air-conditioning and leather seats, music from a cassette player, and my brother for a white-gloved chauffeur, it felt uncivilized to me to pass warm coins and damp bills forward to the driver, who even when we shouted *para!* sometimes barely slowed enough to let us jump from the doorless rear exit.

So I was thrilled to hear another family had hired him. "Where?" I asked, imagining another garage, another suburb of Manila. The aftermath of a typhoon sucked at our shoes as we walked home.

He said, "Saudi Arabia."

I took this as a joke. "Now that's a uniform," I said. Peter O'Toole on a camel, in white robes and a head rope, was pretty much my whole idea of the Middle East.

"I'm serious." He slowed his steps along the creek that flowed through our *barangay*. We called it that: the Creek. In fact it was an open sewage canal, wide enough to fit a pedicab and five or so feet deep, bringing the runoff from our houses through the next village and into the San Juan River. We threw our garbage in the Creek. We joked about what else wound up in there: unlikely cats lured by the fish-bone smell, tainted syringes, worse. No threat could crush a child's tantrum faster than holding a toy—or, better yet, the squalling brat herself—above the Creek. After a flood, eggshells and beer-can tabs and bottle shards clung to the

Creek's banks, as if even trash hoped to escape. But the Creek did serve a purpose, outside of waste disposal: with everyone holding their breath and hustling past the stench as fast as they could, it was the one place in the *barangay* to have a private conversation.

"You're gonna be a college girl," said Andoy. "The textbooks will be heavier, and so will the tuition." Driving taxis and limousines in Riyadh, he said, would pay him six times what he earned in Manila. He'd recoup his airfare and work visa fees in time, with some left over to send us, and save up for the driving school for rich expats he'd open when he returned home for good.

"But I'll apply for scholarships," I said, panicking at the thought of Manila without my brother in it. "A year from now, I'll have enough to start part-time. If I can find a job in the library and cafeteria—and tutor, too, at night—"

"And study when?" He laughed, exposing a hole near the back of his mouth that still startled me. Years before, Andoy's two right upper molars had rotted and fallen out. "Promise me you'll take just one job, and save the wages for pocket money. Bus fare, if you want."

We didn't talk about his other reasons. Along with my textbooks and tuition, Andoy's girlfriend, Ligaya, would be growing heavier too. She was already nineteen weeks heavier, to be exact, with Andoy's twins.

"What exactly will you do in Saudi?" I asked.

"I told you—same as here," said Andoy, "but for Arabs. Rich ones."

"But what will *you* do," I said, pointing at him, "in a place like Saudi?" This was still a few years before everybody's father, uncle, nephew, son began to leave the Philippines for the Middle East, but already we'd heard stories, from the earliest recruits: men who'd gone to jail for looking at a woman the wrong way, unmarried sweethearts who couldn't walk side by side in public, secret sex rooms that charged by the hour and were routinely raided by the police. Here in Manila, the decade of halter tops and hot pants suited Andoy just fine. The night before, he'd nuzzled up to Ligaya and caught her shoulder straps between his teeth. "Spaghetti for dinner," Andoy said, "my favorite." How would he get by in a country where women veiled themselves from head to toe in black?

"I'm going to be a father now," he said. "Saudi's the best place for me."

Before Ligaya, there was Rose; before Rose, there were Vangie, Monica, and Teresita. "She's the one," Andoy would declare each time, clutching his chest as if Cupid had hit the bull's-eye. He knelt at their windows with our father's guitar, crooning till the neighbors complained. *I offer you no wealth or high ambition*, went one of his favorite Tagalog ballads, *beyond the promise of my everlasting love*.

"You sang that to Rose," I said, after one serenade. "And to Vangie, and Aurora, and Belen."

Andoy laughed, flashing that gap behind his teeth—the one flaw, people said, in his otherwise good looks. Looks he'd reportedly inherited from our father, along with the musical gift that had him strumming those *kundiman* by ear. "You'll understand," he told me, "when you fall in love."

That closed the discussion. Love was unknown territory to me: I couldn't challenge him on it any more than I could question what he said about our father, who had taken off for good before my birth; or what our mother told us of life in Manila during the war. I had to take them at their word.

"She puts the sun to shame," he'd say. "I looked at her and every part of me was ringing."

Even more than beauty, what really made my brother weak was danger, obstacles—the chance to break a rule or cross a line or overcome some hideous odds for love. Vangie had a boyfriend. Aurora was engaged. His best friend already had an eye on Rose. Teresita was a decade and a half his senior; Belen lived in another province.

"I can't have her and I *have* to have her," he'd said most recently, after falling for the boss's daughter.

I said, "You've been listening to too many *radionovelas* with Ma."

In convent school I'd known a few girls like Ligaya, girls whose parents had some money but didn't quite play golf in Forbes Park. (Her father owned some fancy cars, as Andoy put it, but his wife was always on his case to sell one.) Ligaya was stunning, even by my brother's standards: rosy and pouty, long and slim but round where it counted, with skin like a steamed pork bun. Pregnancy seemed only to exaggerate those looks. Her hair had grown, with mermaid luster, to her waist. Even her growing belly didn't so much mar her figure as match it, curve for curve. This new look, of course, appalled Ligaya's parents, who had thought that firing Andoy would put an end to the affair. Seeing, in the flesh, how much she'd disobeyed them left no choice but to kick her out.

So Ligaya came to live with us. When she arrived, with her matching crocodile trunk and train case, she burst into tears. "It's a swamp," she sobbed. "I'm going to live in a swamp."

It was a swamp; we didn't need Ligaya to tell us that. Every day my mother washed what clothes we owned and hung them from the banister to dry. Water trickling from the sleeves and hems kept the floor wet. Steam issued from the iron my mother used on the dried clothes, and from the rice she cooked at lunch and dinner, and from the pots of water that we boiled when it flowed brown or orange from our faucets. All that moisture gave the house a smell, so constant we'd forgotten it, of mold.

Nine years before, a “slum upgrade” had turned the scrap shacks of our *barangay* into two-story homes, one room below and one above. We had electricity and plumbing now, concrete blocks instead of tin-and-plywood walls, furniture and some appliances, a bathroom with a faucet and a flush toilet at the foot of the stairs. Since then the First Lady, who’d led this initiative herself, had moved on to concert halls and galleries. The crown jewel of the planned upgrade—a concrete promenade to cover up the open Creek—never materialized. And like all the neighbors’ houses, ours deteriorated faster than it had improved. Rust had spread its scabs over the bathroom floor and walls. The vent built into the wall above the kitchenette to air out cooking smells became a nest for rats, who chewed through the wire mesh and made a racket with their shrieking every night.

We did feel sorry enough to give Ligaya the upstairs room. Having shared the bed there for nine years, my mother and I moved to the sofa and a straw mat on the ground floor. After she had settled in, Ligaya told us “too much up-and-down” could harm the twins. This meant that someone had to bring her meals upstairs to her and bus the dishes after. And *someone* was my mother. Ligaya saw her as a slave, which enraged me. (I must have felt I was the only one who had the right to treat my mother like a slave.) Ligaya couldn’t quite adjust to life without a gardener, a housemaid, or a nanny (not to mention a chauffeur). Of course, she didn’t feel that climbing up and down the stairs to walk outside, take the jeepney to Makati, and visit all the shops she could no longer afford to patronize, like a mourner visiting a grave, would harm the twins.

As for my mother, she was too used to taking orders to push back, at least not right away. For six years now, ever since the trouser factory where she once worked had closed, she’d been calling herself a traveling seamstress, making “house calls” after church each morning in some nearby, nicer towns. But most houses there had help already. If she didn’t happen on a garden party or a child-care crisis that could use an extra hand right then and there, the best she could hope for was a guilt-plagued housewife who could give her pity money. When I was thirteen, still accompanying her on these rounds, I saw people draw their shades as we approached, my mother’s sewing basket of no more use to them than a bundle on some hobo’s stick.

After that, I had a terror of becoming her, the multipurpose servant a few lucky scraps away from living on the street. I refused to serve Ligaya hand and foot. At the same time, I remembered enough from the jungle kingdom of high school not to fight with someone like Ligaya and insist she pull her weight. Instead, watching them both while I did homework on the sofa, I pretended they were strangers, who had little to do with me. I imagined I was a reporter on assignment, paid to watch and cover subjects in a house that wasn’t mine. *Servant work has turned*, I scribbled in a notebook, looking at my mother, *from what she once did for a living to who she is for life*. I had no doubt that both my living and my life would be different. *She holds a grudge against the world*, I wrote of Ligaya, *for defaulting on its promises to beautiful women*. It didn’t occur to me that I’d been counting on similar promises, made to smart girls who studied hard.

In Riyadh, my brother shared a flat with nine men—Filipino gardeners or servants or drivers like him, or men helping to build the pipeline from Saudi’s oil wells to refineries offshore. The desert sun tanned him in no time, as it had his friends. *We all could pass for Moros now*, he wrote home, on an aerogram as thin as onionskin.

When he called for the first time, from a pay phone in a downtown hotel, I told him I liked having a sister for a change. “Why didn’t we think of replacing you sooner?” I’d never lied this way for anybody’s sake before. I must have wanted him to feel, five thousand miles away, that he was working toward a good cause. *School*, I wrote, because I knew he’d eat it up, *has it all over the real world*.

I’d started college that June. When I arrived on campus, among freshmen who had come at sixteen and would leave by twenty, I felt of a different species altogether: *discipula laboranda plebeia*, the ancient, part-time scholarship girl. I was only one year older, but would age faster than them still, paying *tingi* or “retail”-style for a few credits each semester, the way my mother bought garlic by the clove or shampoo by the foil sachet. My classmates didn’t look down on me so much as fail to see me altogether, as I stamped their books and served their lunches, as constant and inconsequential to their landscape as the statue in front of their student union.

This life-size, concrete man on a pedestal was supposed to be a Katipunero, or rebel from the 1896 uprising against Spain. He held a red flag in his right hand and a *bolo* knife in his left, his open mouth a cry to arms. But I saw him more as a security guard: watching for intruders, waving his *bolo* to keep girls like me out of the student union, that exclusive realm of monthly club dues and “activities” that didn’t earn a grade or paycheck.

My partial scholarship was in journalism. I’d never cared for newspapers, but I disliked children and sick people even more. (Teaching and nursing were my other scholarship options.) It had been five years since the President declared martial law, and rules had been cemented about who could print what, and where. One famous editor had said that finding decent Filipino reporters was easier in prison or abroad than in a newsroom in Manila. (No one heard from him again.) But I cared less about press freedom than I cared about myself. If media posts kept opening whatever “real” journalists offended Marcos, that left more for me. I would have followed any marching orders that led out of the *barangay*.

Of course, I knew enough to keep these bleak and bitter motives to myself.

Two months after my brother left, a man came to our door in denim (not just jeans, but a vest and jacket too) and gold-framed aviator glasses. His hair was like a soldier’s: short, cropped close enough to show his scalp; his tennis shoes and T-shirt so white they hurt my eyes.

“Your *carabao*,” he called himself: our water buffalo, our beast of burden. His skin was not quite carabao-dark, but close. And rather than a plow or produce cart, he’d brought a woven straw box full of envelopes from men he knew in Saudi. “Something smells delicious, Tita,”

he told my mother. She plated up some rice and fish for him.

He told us his name and parents' province, what job had brought him to Saudi and how long ago. My mother fixed her eyes on him, as if by staring deep enough she'd locate Andoy there. "We have good times, considering," he said. His shared flat in Riyadh, for instance, overlooked the public plaza known as Chop Chop Square. "Who needs TV when you've got ringside tickets to that?" He raised his arms to show us how the executioner would wield his sword over the accused. We must have cringed; he cut the demonstration short. He cleared his throat and left it at "You know Pinoys. Easily entertained." He reached into his neckband to reveal a gold cross on a chain, purchased in secret from an Indian dealer. "It's a crime to wear it there," he said, stroking his neck as if thinking of Chop Chop Square again. "But I feel safer with it on than not." He tucked it back into his shirt.

Ligaya glowed around him, a sudden charming hostess. "I'd offer you some San Miguel," she said, "if we had any. You miss the taste, I bet." His visit was the most time I had seen her spend downstairs with us. She even smiled and thanked my mother for the food. I puffed up too, made jokes to get my own kind of attention. "Make sure my brother knows that *beer* is all she meant," I said, "when she offered you what you can't get in Saudi." He laughed.

Before leaving, the *carabao* gave us Andoy's envelope. He didn't blink when I turned from the table to count what was inside it. He must have hoped, when it was his turn to send money home, that his own wife or sister would do the same. Standing from the meal, he rubbed his stomach. "I'll need two seats on my flight back to Saudi," he joked, "if everyone I see today feeds me like this."

After that, they came every two months, on leave between their own contracts. They worked with Andoy or lived with him; they had socialized at parties in the workers' village or worshipped together at a secret Mass held in a basement. Each time, my mother set a place at the table; Ligaya glowed and flirted; I joked around and counted money; the *carabao* ate and told stories and complained, before leaving, about needing two plane seats for his return to Saudi. Each time they wore the uniform I came to call the Saudi suit: the aviators, the white T-shirt and spotless sneakers, the gull-shaped Levi's stitch on their back pockets as they turned toward their next delivery. Ray-Ban, Adidas, Jockey—"Stateside" brands, about as far from Peter O'Toole's *thob* and head rope as I could have imagined. They even smelled the same: like cigarette smoke and crumpled cash. Through them, Andoy remitted half his pay to us, while he lived on a quarter and saved the rest for his return.

Ligaya gave birth in September. Standing in for my brother, I stared at her flushed and puffy face; her plastic cap and sweat-soaked gown; her swollen ankles as they thrashed against steel stirrups that, in my eyes, might as well have had a ball and chain and gang of fellow prisoners attached. I pitied her, and every woman in the ward that day—not just the wailing ones in labor but the nurses at their service and the twin girls who emerged, all smeared in blood and fury, from between Ligaya's legs.

My mother's hope—that babies would smooth out Ligaya's nature; that nursing, cradling, bathing, and swaddling them would calm their mother, too—turned out to be in vain. Ligaya had a new and longer catalog of gripes now. "They refuse to drink," she sobbed, jamming the bottles to their infant mouths. She mourned the changes they had wreaked upon her figure. "They're here to stay," she wailed, in underwear, tracing the stretch marks on her waist and hips.

The twins inherited Ligaya's lungs and her talent for misery. They screamed whether we put them down or picked them up, whether we spoke to or sang to or ignored them. Illness and infections plagued them: thrush, clogged noses, pinkeye, diarrhea. I chased their mucus and secretions, wiping noses, backsides; wetting washcloths to dislodge dried crusts. "This is *Sisyphian*," I said, kneeling to scrub the floor or furniture. As if anyone understood. As if my fancy new college-speak could elevate me from the muck.

In May, another *carabao* with dark skin, military hair, aviators, and denim came to our door. Our mother was boiling rice at the stove. "Save some for me," the *carabao* called through the screen; and there was no mistaking Andoy's voice.

I ran to him, the textbook falling from my lap, and Andoy dropped his suitcases. "You reek like a *carabao*, too," I said, my cheek against the smoke-and-money smell of his shoulder.

Our mother couldn't speak. She touched his face, confirming him the way a blind man would. "It's gone," she finally said, when her fingers reached his hair.

Ligaya played indifferent, unlidding the rice and cooing to her babies. When she turned, she held them out like puppets. "*We're not supposed to talk to strangers*," she squeaked for them. "*Who are you?*"

Andoy grinned. His daughters, who had fussed and squirmed all day, blinked silently at him, docile as dolls. "I'll show you who I am," he said, taking them into his right arm and winging his left around Ligaya. With a dip, he planted the kind of kiss on her I'd seen in pictures of American victory parades after the war.

"Idiot!" Ligaya yelped, smiling.

He'd brought gifts home from Saudi: gold earrings for Ligaya and the twins, a rug for the upstairs room, a brass coffeepot with a swan-shaped spout. But more came after. From the electronic bazaar in Quiapo, he bought me a digital wristwatch and a typewriter with its own carrying case. Between deliveries to other families of *carabao*, he found my mother an electric cooker that could steam rice without her supervision. By the weekend, we had a color TV set. Neighbors came to watch *John and Marsha* on our sofa. Our mother made adobo and pineapple ham, while Ligaya served up the San Miguel and Johnnie Walker Black she'd always wanted to offer the other *carabao*.

Afterward, Andoy and I walked out to dump the chicken bones and paper plates into the Creek. “Do all the *carabao* party like this when they come home?” I said. “What will you have left?”

“Left for what? What am I working for if not my girls?” He put an arm around my shoulder and lowered his voice. “Actually, I’ve been meaning to tell you something.”

The last time I’d heard him whisper, in this keyed-up and conspiring way, it was to tell me he had fallen for Ligaya. “You can’t be serious. In *Saudi*?” I groaned. “You’re a father now, you said yourself!”

“Not that!” He laughed. “Although you could say I got lucky.”

He’d driven, many times, a man named Abdul Ghaffar Al-Thunayan from the airport to his palace in Al Nasiriyah. When his limousine broke down one day, with Al-Thunayan in the back, Andoy was worried. Al-Thunayan, who sat on the Ministry of Oil and had ties to the royal House of Saud, was an important customer. Displeasing him would not go over well with Andoy’s boss. But Andoy peeked under the limo’s hood, tightened the battery cables, and fiddled with the spark plugs till the engine purred again.

His passenger took notice. “I have great passion for cars,” Al-Thunayan said, as Andoy dropped him off. “I like my Corniche convertible, but Maserati is also excellent.”

A week later Andoy’s boss told him he was free. Al-Thunayan had bought him out of his driving contract and moved him west, into the servants’ wing of his mansion in Jeddah. My brother took over for a retiring Indian chauffeur, but he would also occupy a new post, as personal custodian of Al-Thunayan’s luxury car collection.

Needless to say, he would be earning more. “Enough for you to go full-time,” said Andoy. “No more *tingi*-style education. Have fun, be a college kid, get involved in some campus life, all right? That’s my order.”

How my brother knew from *full-time student* and *campus life*—things I’d barely dreamed about myself—I had no clue.

When we got back inside, he chased Ligaya up the stairs. She giggled as they closed the door, and then the phonograph drowned out their voices. The twin I carried stopped her gurgling long enough to smile at me. Her sister fell asleep in my mother’s lap. This kind of peace seemed possible in our house, the month Andoy was home.

In June, I quit my cafeteria job and gave up all but two shifts at the library. These were the new terms of what my brother called the Abdul Ghaffar Al-Thunayan Scholarship. I flailed, that first day of the semester, at doing as the campus natives did: their slow and easy amble through the grass was harder than it looked, and sitting on the quad, against a tree, made my spine ache. I went and studied them from a bench instead. A boy, reading the campus

daily newspaper on the other end of the bench, reached across to clamp his hand on my knee. I froze in fear. *This must be flirting*, I thought, despairing that only “college kids” who lived the “campus life” knew how to handle it.

The boy just smiled, pointing his chin at my knee. My leg had been bouncing nervously against the bench since I’d sat down. “Sorry,” I said. He nodded and went back to reading. I was too embarrassed to move again till after he stood, leaving his paper behind.

I picked it up, scanning headlines about an Independence Day earthquake, the ongoing trial of former Senator Aquino, a teenage housemaid named Rosy Lacaba. The second page contained instructions, below the masthead, for the prospective student reporters.

Why hadn’t I thought of it before? The perfect solution—a necessary notch on my résumé that still fulfilled Andoy’s mandate for Life Outside the Classroom.

The next day, per instructions, I brought a steno notebook and ballpoint pen to the campus daily’s headquarters, on the fourth floor of the student union. *Don’t blame me*, I thought, looking up as I passed the Katipunero on his pedestal. *This wasn’t my idea*.

But Room 401 was locked. I checked the paper again, not knowing yet what I’d later find out: that its editors and reporters no longer met in the student union, that they had gone underground after running afoul of both the university chancellor and the national Office of the Press Secretary too many times. I didn’t know the paper met in secret now, in the off-campus apartments of its alumni, who believed that any savvy would-be journalist should easily sniff out as much.

I did hear voices, though, and followed them to the other end of the hall. There, under a cloud of smoke, twelve boys were sitting on the floor, around a braided rug. They seemed dressed for some other time and climate, in plaid wool pants, velvet jackets with large buttons and thick piping, floppy printed cravats. A podium in the corner held a plaster bust of José Rizal; in the opposite corner, a second podium held a thick unabridged dictionary, open to the middle.

“If I wanted to eat chop suey, I’d go to Señor Woo’s,” said one boy in a top hat, flinging a typed manuscript onto the floor. “It’d be more satisfying, too. Is this a story? Is it enough to take old sermons and pop songs, comic books and teaching manuals, and call it a story?”

Another boy held up his hand, in its fraying fingerless glove. “What other way is there to write about this country?” he replied. “Three hundred years under Spain, via Acapulco. Thirty years under the Americans and three under the Japanese. A history of fragments and confusion—‘chop suey’ is the only style that captures it.”

A third boy argued one could write *about* confusion without actually *confusing* the reader. A fourth insisted that old standards of clarity in prose no longer had relevance to how we live today. “Is that what fiction’s after, then—real life today?” said a fifth. “That’s not why I read stories. If I just wanted facts shoved in my face, I’d go and read the campus paper.”

By now I knew I’d come to the wrong place and backed away. A shrill bell rang, and a sixth boy pulled a brass chain from the pocket of his tweed jacket. “We’re out of time,” he said.

They were still split down the middle: six of them for publishing the story, six against. A rolled-up manuscript was tossed in my direction, and all twelve faces turned. “What do *you* think?” asked the timekeeper, looking at me as he shut off the alarm and wound the dial.

Now that they had seen me, I was too proud to retreat. As far out of my depth as I was, I stopped to skim the first few pages at my feet, which took me on a kind of romp—through artifacts and documents that stood, it seemed, for the history of the Philippines. Lines translated from a Spanish zarzuela. Menu items, such as stewed prunes and “college pudding,” served on the 1901 USS *Thomas* voyage from San Francisco to Manila Bay. I couldn’t tell if these fragments were real or fabricated, or some combination of both. The author, whose name was blacked out in the top-left corner with a marker, had what I could only call a casual relationship with grammar, chronology, punctuation, historical accuracy, and most other courtesies a reader might expect.

I didn’t care much for the story, but I had the urge to mimic them, these boys, adopt their earnest style of arguing the way I’d tried to sit and walk the campus like a full-timer. “It *is* a mess,” I told them, “but what’s wrong with that? Whoever wrote this took away the narrator and left some room for me. I’m not a child. Why hand the story to me on a platter? Why shouldn’t it be up to us to piece together our own history?”

With that, somehow, I passed. The tie was broken, and the boys moved aside to make space for me. We spent a half hour on each of three remaining stories, the seconds tickling like a toy heart in the tweed pocket of the boy to my left. I sat and watched and chimed in now and then, feeling like an interloper at some mad tea party. Even when I told them I had landed there by accident, from the journalism department, they just congratulated and welcomed me to what they called the dark side.

And that was how I joined the campus fiction journal: as a sort of challenge to myself, a game. The magazine was called *The Katipunero*, like the statue outside. I’d seen it before in the library, where every three months I would bring its newest issue out onto the periodicals shelf. The heavy, lead-gray cover, textured to resemble slate. The loopy calligraphy of its letterpress title. The *Katipunero* was like that: all preciousness and pretense. Those Victorian getups; those boys, who also called themselves *Katipuneros* and wrote fiction of their own in their spare time, though everyone knew that, after graduating, they would forsake such things to join their fathers’ banks and firms. Outside of class they didn’t need to work for

money; instead they spent their spare time analyzing paragraph breaks and “pee oh vee” as if the cure for cancer depended on it. A kind of smirking fascination brought me back to the student union every week, to pick up new submissions from the tray next to José Rizal and read them on the jeepney home, at lunch, even on the grass; to type rejection slips and bring them to the campus post office; to bring pieces I liked to the editors’ attention; to offer my two cents at the weekly meeting.

The Katipuneros stayed up late to pull off an issue each quarter. Afterward they spent the university’s money and some of their own to throw a launch party. I passed out flyers that most students threw away behind my back, hung posters that would disappear beneath other posters the next day, sound-tested microphones in the cafés where student authors read their work aloud. I drank a lot and smoked a little at these parties, feeling as the only girl that I had to keep up. (“Most girls prefer poetry or journalism to us,” one of the Katipuneros told me, when I asked if there’d ever been a Katipunera before.) After the cafés closed, they spilled into the dormitories to prolong such life-and-death debates as whether literature had social duties, as Salvador Lopez believed, or whether art’s only obligation was to art itself, as Jose Garcia Villa did. I even lost my virginity to one of the editors, behind the common-room sofa in his dorm, after the others had gone home or fallen asleep.

Faking my way among the Katipuneros also gave me an escape from the *barangay*. At home my mother, sick of slaving for Ligaya, had started to stick up for herself. But Ligaya wouldn’t go down without a fight, and every day after Andoy’s visit from Saudi, I witnessed one.

“You should have thought of that before,” my mother said, hearing Ligaya complain of morning sickness.

“Before what?”

My mother eyed Ligaya’s belly. “Andoy’s had a million girlfriends. You think you’re the first? You’re just the first to get yourself in trouble.”

“*Myself* in trouble!” Ligaya almost choked. “Of course. I did this to myself. So I could get my hooks into the son of an unemployed seamstress.”

Another time, Ligaya alleged our home was unsafe for children. “We live in a death trap,” she said once the twins were crawling. They were always slipping on the wet floor, or picking up dust bunnies and trying to eat them.

“Nothing’s wrong with this place, if you *watch* your kids,” said my mother. “I brought two children up here.”

“I wouldn’t brag about your children’s *upbringing* if I were you.”

“Now my children weren’t brought up right? A girl in college, and a son, who’ll go as far as Saudi to support his wife and kids?”

“His wife! His *wife!*” Ligaya howled, as if she’d heard a punch line, holding her still-ringless hand against her ribs.

They bickered in that same style about money, about Andoy, about child rearing and housekeeping. Eventually my mother would turn on the TV to drown out Ligaya’s voice. At full volume, the soap operas bled into their arguments, so that sometimes I could hardly tell whether a plate had shattered in my own house or an actress on the screen had flung it. The noise would set the babies wailing. Ligaya stormed upstairs and slammed the door (or had the evil landlord on TV slammed it?). Music blared from the phonograph, angering the babies even more.

I feared catching their rages, like the infections that bounced back and forth between my nieces. When Ligaya gave birth to a third daughter, in February, I nearly moved into the student union. “Off to work,” I’d say and make tracks as soon as the bickering began. Each time I passed the Katipunero, he looked less like a hostile guard and more like my redeemer. The brass plaque beneath him contained an old Tagalog word for *freedom*, and he stood for mine.

By March most students cleared the campus for vacation—except the Katipuneros, who insisted on a summer issue; and me, who still had credits to make up from my part-time days. With fewer writers around to contribute, we had to lift our policy against publishing staff work. The managing editor wrote a story called “McKinley Road,” in which a wealthy businessman left his wife, children, and mansion for a secretary. In the copy editor’s story, “Keys to the City,” evil typewriters rose up against and killed the leading lights of Philippine literature, one by one. An associate editor wrote about a seventeenth-century Colettine nun with supernatural powers. And one of my fellow readers wrote about a colony of fruit bats fleeing the destruction of their home forest for a new place to live.

These were good stories, and reading them, I had to admit that the Katipuneros were more than spoiled blowhards. The literary magazines and novels they read instead of studying for class; their half-hour critiques; their drunken post-midnight debates about whether, for instance, the English language, as a souvenir of American imperialism, could ever be the basis of a truly national literary tradition or whether Filipino literature had a future only in the local vernacular—all of that had added up to something, which was their own art, or the not-unpromising beginnings of it. The Katipuneros exceeded their own standard for student work. And their devotion to a magazine that turned no profit, whose readership nobody measured, their passionate arguments over what belonged in it, was not a game. They’d given themselves over to exactly what Andoy had wished on me: an enterprise without a practical end. They were amateurs, in the classic sense of the word: they did it all for love.

It came to me that next to them I was the dilettante. I didn’t sit around in a top hat or a velvet jacket, but I drank their whiskey and passed judgment on their craft, all the while never trying to make something of my own.

But if I were to write myself, then what about? I knew nothing about businessmen and secretaries, evil typewriters or supernatural nuns or fruit bats in the forest—and those were just the ideas that were taken. Pausing before the plaster Katipunero outside the student union again, I felt gloomy, as unwelcome in his world as ever. But for the first time, I looked at his face and fist and bare feet up close. Till then I'd had him sewn up with ideas about wealthy full-time students; I'd never taken stock of his disheveled, common clothes. The Katipunero, I realized, was poor. The muscles showing through his torn *camisa de chino* belonged not to some fop who sat in classrooms and cafés all day but to a peasant “son of sweat,” who'd plowed and planted, dug and hoed since he could stand.

Of course he rose above those circumstances to become a founding hero of the nation. Anyone who'd taken grade-school civics or read the plaque at his feet could tell you that. But now I wondered about others like him—the majority of sons of sweat, who didn't end up making history. I couldn't write their stories—not exactly, having never seen a farm or country field in all my life. But I knew something about city peasants—Manila sons of sweat like Andoy, whose experiences came to me in letters and cassette tapes, conversations on the phone or with the *carabao*. Before I knew what I was doing, I had found a bench beside the student union and started writing in my notebook:

In Riyadh he shared a flat with nine men—gardeners, servants, or drivers like him, or construction workers on the pipeline being built from Saudi's oil wells to refineries offshore. I could pass for a Moro now, he wrote on an aerogram as thin as onionskin, about the way the desert sun had darkened him.

I skipped my afternoon classes, gliding through campus, landing on a grassy quad here and a flight of stone steps there to add a paragraph or sentence. At home, my mother begged me to consider the electric bill as I wrote by the kitchenette bulb through the night. I barely ate or slept for two days. If someone had predicted, a year earlier, that my brother would inspire me one day to write fiction, *for fun*, I would not have believed them. Now it felt both new and fated to me, a thing I didn't know I'd always meant to do.

The words came easily, at first. It made me happier than I'd ever been to sketch out scenes in my notebook and type them up. “Aren't *you* in a good mood,” said Ligaya, and then: “Did a man finally notice you, by some miracle?”

And then I read my draft again, stacking the masterwork in my head up against the mess I'd made on the page, and sank into despair. “Whoever he is, he's not worth it,” said my mother, as I moaned and wallowed facedown on the sofa. That night the same pages I had filled in a manic fever were torn into shreds, floating in the Creek.

The summer passed like this. From the clouds of inspiration to the gutters of dejection and self-loathing and back again, over and over. My grades, meanwhile, slipped in only one direction. By the time I failed a term paper in psychology, after ditching class to write the day

it was assigned, I decided that my problem was I hadn't read enough. And the hole in my apprenticeship was too wide to close in my free time. I resolved, like a determined suitor, to get serious. In the middle of my sixth semester in college, I dropped my journalism major and took up English literature with a special focus on creative writing.

"Shifty?" asked my mother.

"Shiftee," I said, the registrar's term for students who switched majors. "It happens all the time. The average student changes twice or more before graduation." I admitted that the switch would set me back a few semesters.

"How much longer?" said my mother.

"How much more money is the question," said Ligaya.

I couldn't blame them. What would I want next? A room on campus? A semester abroad?

Rather than sell Andoy on my craziness, I released him. *I'm going part-time again*, I wrote to Jeddah. *I'll pay my own way, take another decade to finish if I have to.*

He called as soon as he received my letter. "It says here it just hit you," he said. "One day you knew."

"It's true." I knew how cracked this made me sound.

"Now it keeps you up at night. You feel awake for the first time. Like you'd been sleepwalking through life before."

Instead of answering, I pictured him in Al-Thunayan's servant quarters, standing by the phone, untangling the cord. Everything appeared to be a shade of desert sand—the walls, the carpet, and the telephone; a yellow pencil, dented by the different teeth; a yellow notepad filled with scribbled messages. Squares of yellow light checkered the hall from the doorways of the shared bedrooms off it. There'd be a smell of instant noodles and dirty laundry, as in boys' dormitories I had visited; and from opposite ends of the hallway, the sounds of a communal TV and a running toilet.

"Congratulations!" he said.

"*Congratulations?*"

"Now you know what it's like."

"To change my major?"

“To fall in love.” Andoy laughed. “I always wondered who it would be. What boy could keep up with the toughest girl I know? I should have guessed: it wouldn’t be someone for you. At least not a living someone. It would be Shakespeare, and José Rizal, and the Katipunero outside the student union.”

I cringed. “It sounds ridiculous,” I said. “Forget it.”

“No!” said Andoy. “Listen. I’m no scholar, but love I know about. That’s *my* major.”

“I’ll never get a decent job.” His optimism had me arguing against myself.

“Relax! Love’s a miracle, not a disaster. Who said it would be easy, or convenient? But if you can’t sacrifice everything for love, what else is there?”

“It’ll take more time.”

“And money—yes, love does.” He laughed again. “You’ll learn *that* quick.”

He did have one condition. “I want to meet this new love of yours,” said Andoy. Anything I wrote, he said, I was to send him a copy.

In Jeddah, Andoy told me, every Filipino line cook and janitor seemed to know about Abdul Ghaffar Al-Thunayan. Some saw him as an almost mythical creature: the fair, generous master, rare as a genie or an oasis in the Rub’ al-Khali desert. Al-Thunayan fed his servants well, paid them on time, let them hang on to their own passports and work permits. And for all his wealth, Al-Thunayan chose to have just one wife, Alia, and treated her like the princess that she, by blood, actually was.

At his new job, when he wasn’t driving Al-Thunayan’s family, my brother washed and waxed the cars, dusted and vacuumed their insides, balmed the leather seats with oil. Privately, he christened each one with a Filipino name. He called this BMW Dolphy; that Jaguar, Imelda. He kept the keys to every car and the code to the garage’s security alarm. Family or friends who wished to borrow cars from Al-Thunayan—from oil associate to minor prince—went through Andoy first.

Best of all, Al-Thunayan let him “exercise” each car as he saw fit. My brother drove to the coast at dusk to watch the sky change colors over the Red Sea. Or he took the other servants downtown on their days off, to eat fast food and hear the Filipino waiters hoot in admiration. “A Rolls-Royce with anaconda-skin seats!” he said. “My friends can’t pick their jaws up off the floor.”

I drank these details in, writing one Andoy-inspired character after another. When I mailed him all my drafts, as promised, Andoy was tickled by the attention. “I guess I’m going to be famous after all,” he said. That year he answered more of my questions about his life in Saudi Arabia than would fit onto the page.

Other readers (I took my first fiction workshop that semester) were more critical. I couldn't just record Andoy's experiences, my classmates said. Good fortune like my brother's did not make for a story. Where was the conflict? The danger? *Fiction needs trouble, or else it's just description*, wrote my professor in the margin of one draft, underlining "trouble" twice.

"Does Al-Thunayan have a temper?" I asked my brother.

"Not that I've seen."

"But every prince has got his warts," I insisted, quoting that same professor. "What does Al-Thunayan do if a servant makes a mistake?"

"I want to help you," Andoy said. "But he's a good man, and he hires good people. You'll have to make up your own trouble. It is *fiction* isn't it?"

I tried. I wrote about what might happen to my fictional chauffeur if vandals keyed a Bentley under his watch, or stole the stereo. I wrote about the chauffeur's friends nicking the gold-flecked paint by accident, or staining the anaconda leather with their jars of black-market *siddique*. Goofy scenarios, but they did give me some confidence in my own imagination. I began to see that Andoy's luck could last in real life while I embellished it with fictional disasters. I stopped searching for the hidden dangers in his tapes and letters home.

So when his troubles really started, I missed it. I didn't notice the shift, as he continued to invoke her in his letters, from *Al-Thunayan's wife* to *Madame* to *Alia*. If I thought of her at all, I thought of a black veil, nothing more. He'd praised too many legs and lips over the years for me to recognize, in this case, desire for what he couldn't see. By the time I reopened the letters and replayed the tapes, by the time I realized the warts I should have looked out for were his, not Al-Thunayan's, it was much too late.

The eyes of Al-Thunayan's wife are hard to describe.

I know Madame is nearby from the clinking sound of jewelry on her wrists and ankles.

When I drive Alia into town, the car afterwards smells like honey and roses.

My twin nieces could identify a pair of jeans and aviator glasses before their second birthday. "Cow!" they cried from their playpen that May, pointing to our screen door. Their infant pronunciation of *carabao* had stuck.

It was Andoy, their own father, at the door. They held their palms out to him, a trick we'd taught them to amuse the *carabao*.

"How *is* my brother, Cow?" I said, as he met his baby daughter. The twins, who recognized his uniform more than his face, kept saying "Cow" and play-begging to him, a sight that gave me such sad visions of a litter suckling at some giant teat that I had to joke around to keep

from crying. “We hear they’re treating him like dirt out there. He must be wasting away.”

In fact, Andoy had put on weight. His cheeks looked fuller, with a flush to them, like he’d been jogging in the sun. “He’s miserable,” said Andoy, grinning. “The one thing keeping him alive is his kid sister, who he swears will be a famous writer someday. He’ll retire rich, off her.”

Andoy wanted to make his deliveries first thing in the morning. By the time I woke up, he’d already come back from the bank, dressed in his denim and white shoes. He beckoned me to help. At the kitchen table, he went down a list of names and royal contributions, converting them on a calculator into pesos, which I doled into envelopes. We matched cassette tapes, photographs, and cards to the amounts and put them in a straw *tampipi* box. Then we took the jeepney: from Antipolo to Santa Rosa; from Marikina to Laguna; from tin shantytowns to houses with clay roofs and living room pianos in neighborhoods so tiny I could hardly believe the people there relied, as we did, on a son or brother overseas. Aging mothers squinted hard at Andoy, as if they could blur their own sons into being. Wives and girlfriends perked up in his presence. Children gaped at the stranger they were told to kiss because “he knows your father,” and I even recognized myself, in teens who surfaced from their textbooks long enough to crack a joke and count the money. Like all the *carabao* I’d met, my brother sat and ate more than he wanted, fed them Saudi trivia they’d likely heard before. I saw what an essential trade was taking place. My brother’s health and cheerfulness told them their own beloved boys were well. And he would bring their rosy performances of family life back to his friends in Jeddah. Walking through each *barangay* with him, into the swarm of children shouting *Carabao!*; seeing people through each screen door rise when he appeared, in hope and recognition; I finally understood the purpose of the Saudi suit. I’d always thought it heavy for Manila, not to mention a billboard for thieves. But men so silent and invisible overseas must have loved this guarantee of being *seen* at home.

After our final stop, Andoy wanted to buy presents for the children. We picked up roller skates and tricycles in Quiapo, toys for children older than his own. “You know the twins don’t even know how to use a spoon and fork yet,” I protested.

“I miss a lot of firsts,” he said. “At least this way I’ll leave them with the right equipment.” His ideas for his girls, their childhood—much like *campus life* and *full-time course load* for me—seemed to have originated somewhere far outside the lives of anyone we knew. The movies, maybe.

I fell asleep on our way home. Andoy held my hand as I dismounted, woozy, from the jeepney. Then he helped the women after me, standing like a footman in the road. I couldn’t stop myself thinking that he’d turned, the way our mother had years ago, into servant for life.

“We need a Cadillac next time to get to all those houses,” I said, remembering the days he used to chauffeur me to convent school. “Being a *carabao* is more exhausting than it looks.”

“It’s not so bad.” My brother slowed his steps along the Creek, our old signal to talk in private, where the others wouldn’t hear.

“Make it quick,” I said. “The Creek smells extra ripe tonight.” I was so used to his good news by then that I added, “Let me guess. Al-Thunayan adopted you? Or bought you a Cadillac of your own?”

Andoy laughed and shook his head. Then he said, “What I told you about love is true. It’s never easy or convenient.” His smile faded. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, as if the dust and garbage smells of our neighborhood, the mud and sewage, were precious memories he wanted to preserve.

He and Alia, the wife of his Saudi employer, hadn’t planned it. And when they felt it, they tried to suppress it. “But it took over us,” my brother said. A fragile conspiracy among the other house servants gave them time alone together. “Not that it ever feels like enough.”

“You’re in love?” I said stupidly, my voice and hands shaking.

“I’ll still provide for all my girls,” said Andoy. “I’ll still come home to see you every chance I get. This won’t change anything.”

But I couldn’t believe that. Not after all the *carabao* stories I’d heard over the years. My brother’s love affair broke more Saudi laws than I could count.

“You said yourself how lucky you’ve been there,” I said. “Your *amo* treats you well. And now you want to test that luck? For what?”

“If you knew her, you wouldn’t need to ask.”

“Why don’t you introduce us, then? Invite her to the *barangay* for tea. I’ll tour her along the Creek. Show her where we keep our pet rats.” I had an urge to smack him, but didn’t. “What were you thinking?”

He shook his head again. “I had to stop thinking.” He’d lain awake too many nights, he said, thinking: about the religious police, about the lashings men he knew endured in prison, about the public plaza with its granite tiles and chessboard-size drain. Risks he chose to take, for love.

When we got home I didn’t breathe a word of Andoy’s trouble to my mother, who was chopping onions by the stove; or to Ligaya, who was folding washcloths while her babies cooed and gurgled in their pen. I didn’t speak of it that night or the rest of the month, even to Andoy. As long as I didn’t mention his dalliance aloud, even after he left Manila for the third time, I believed I could contain his story, leave it unfinished at the point where he had told me he was in love and reassured me everything would be all right. I could just will this craziness with Alia to run its course, like all his love affairs.

For months, it worked. The envelopes arrived, on schedule, through the *carabao*. Andoy called home and wrote, made plans for the future with us while carrying on five thousand miles away with Alia, like any man who had a ship in more than one port.

We kept hearing from him until November. Then a month passed without word from him. At Christmas, we received no phone call or black-market greeting card, the kind he used to buy from an Indian grocer who kept a secret stash under the register. We didn't hear from him on New Year's Eve, the start of a new decade, when the children, as they did each year after using up their store-bought firecrackers, hurled matches into the Creek until a bright hedge of fire blazed through the *barangay*. I'd done this as a child myself, never once considering the danger. Even the youngest of us, I think, got the symbolism: new beginnings, our village cauterizing itself clean of all the past year's garbage.

But that year, the year Andoy went silent, the flames only looked like hell to me, and smelled like what they were: a gutter of filthy gases burning.

By late January, Ligaya and my mother were frantic, and I was channeling my fears into the only place I could. In my stories, Andoy had injured his hand or voice or mouth; he'd argued with a *carabao* who got revenge by "losing" his *balikbayan* envelope; Al-Thunayan had assigned him, as his most trusted servant, to an emergency top secret project in the desert where contact with the outside world wasn't possible. I made up one fat chance after another to explain his silence. I'd written my brother so often into danger, willing his real life to look more like fiction; the least I could do was try to write him out of it.

I was at home alone, typing away at one such story, when I heard knocking at our door and saw a pair of jeans and aviator glasses through the screen.

Andoy used to dream aloud of turning our mother into the kind of woman who watched game shows and soap operas all day, lifting her fingers only to sip cocktails or eat cake. "She'll get too lazy to talk," he said. "We'll have to hang a whistle from her neck to call the servants with."

We stretched the joke out. "Her hands will fatten up," I said. "We'll have to cut off all the rings you bought her. Melt them down into one ring, that barely fits her pinkie." It tickled us to even think of her, our servant mother, at rest.

And yet, in a perverse way, in that first year of a new decade, Andoy's dream came true. My mother did retire to the sofa. Clutching one of Andoy's old bandannas, she watched TV for hours, bursting into tears at times I least expected: scenes where estranged soap-opera lovers reunited, moments when game-show contestants hit the jackpot.

In that same year Ligaya's parents called, offering forgiveness and a place for her and the three children to live. But she surprised me too, by staying with my mother in our *barangay*. I thought their bickering would flare up again in no time, but it never really did. Instead, leaving

the twins with a neighbor, Ligaya strapped the baby to her back and traced my mother's daily route: to church, then house to house with a sewing basket and an offer to work at almost anything.

As far as they knew, Andoy was a victim, pure and simple. I told them (when they raised the inevitable questions, and asked me how much I knew) a tale of treachery and blackmail, with details lifted out of Genesis. I cast my brother as the decent Joseph, his lover as the wife of Potiphar, tugging at his clothes. I told them Andoy fled her advances, but not before she'd seized a work glove and the sooty rag he used to clean the cars. *Your servant has insulted me*, this Alia told her husband, waving the false evidence like a pair of flags.

And I, holding the truth inside me, returned to the dutiful path of the old scholarship girl. Around the time the envelopes stopped coming, I asked for my old jobs back at the library and cafeteria. "We miss you," said one Katipunero as I stamped his book. He'd read some of my stories months before, shy as I still was about sharing them, and encouraged me to keep at it. "Come join us when your shift is done," said another, as I served him lunch. He'd once promised to make room in the fall issue for me, if I had something good. I made all sorts of plans to see them, but got too busy. Most of them graduated later that year, replaced by younger boys I didn't know. Whenever I walked past the student union, I avoided my old statue's eyes. *Everybody has to grow up sometime*, I told him. Soon I was majoring in journalism again. A professor offered meals, a room, and fieldwork credits in exchange for my transcribing shelves of interviews she'd taped with politicians since the sixties. So I moved my books and clothes and typewriter to her town house close to campus. Once a week I still took the jeepney home to Salapi Road to stock the fridge and pay some bills. This started as my private penance for deceiving them, Ligaya and my mother. But over time it just felt like a load that someone had to carry. They were "my" girls now.

Rejoining the ranks of the older, part-time scholar—early to class and early to work, always bypassing the student union—didn't leave spare time for much, least of all something as frivolous as fiction. Except, of course, that I couldn't sleep. At night, after class and work and studying, I lay awake, while my landlady professor snored next door. The guilt of lying to my family, and the grief of missing Andoy, did not exactly add up to a good night's rest. And so I passed the time by writing.

It was always Andoy, or a version of him, that I wrote about. The same imagined brother that sustained me once we stopped hearing from the real one. This fictional Andoy called me from a pay phone in Bahrain, where friendly Filipino workers sheltered him and Alia after a bold, elaborate escape from Saudi. *She left her cousins at the Suq and met our van on an unmarked road*. This Andoy sent a tape from Abu Dhabi, saying he and Alia had bought new passports and work visas from an expert forger. *Expensive, but love always is*. This Andoy wrote home on an aerogram postmarked from Dubai, where he'd secured janitorial work at a hotel. *If you work hard—and cheap enough, I've found—most bosses will keep any secret*. Things didn't always end well for this Andoy, either. In one draft, the strain of all that hiding

broke him. In another, Alia Al-Thunayan saw love wasn't much to live on after all, and grew to hate the man who'd plucked her from the comfort of her husband's palace. I even had Andoy arrested, sent to prison, and deported by a Saudi judge back to Manila, never to see Alia again.

These Andoys went by other names, or none at all; but they had one thing, their survival, in common. At times I thought so long and deeply about other ways it might have gone for my brother that I almost sensed him, present in the room, with me. I never could get used to the "withdrawal," as some *Katipunero* staffers called it: the rude comedown from having lived so thoroughly inside a story it felt real. But these stories weren't. I could spend my whole life writing, version upon version, none of which would turn the man in jeans and aviators at our door into Andoy. That *carabao* would still arrive, not two months into 1980, prop the glasses on his head, and tell me, "You look like him." This man would still open his palms to me, to show he had no envelope on him. What he had brought was news: that Andoy's body had been found, alongside Alia's, inside a destroyed Porsche that belonged to her husband, his employer. He'd lost control of the car after swerving off the road to avoid a collision. An accident—on a routine, if secret, drive between lovers, ending in a fate not far from what they might have suffered anyway, if anyone had found out what they were up to. Fiction didn't have a prayer over facts like that. And yet, I felt it would have pleased Andoy to know that I still wrote. I could picture him, reading my words somewhere, chuckling at my attempts to save some version of his life. Who could say, then, that I had an altogether lousy or inadequate imagination? My brother got to live forever, in a sense.

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