

MARINA HATED GAY MEN. THEY HAD NO PLACE in this world. "Exterminate the gays"—that was her battle cry. Why would they change what God had given them? *Bakla, binabae, bayot*—it wouldn't be long before they hid under other names like *bading, sward, beki, badaf, syoki*—but they were all the same. They changed colors, but the venom remained the same.

All around, women were wearing miniskirts, bold colors, or psychedelic prints, but Marina always wore a gray or blue dress. Or perhaps her favorite: white. Most women back then wore bangs. She usually kept her long hair in a bun.

Whenever she entered a place (she was so thin she looked like a walking stick grown over with long hair), she could immediately smell where there were snapping fingers and swaying hips. Her nose would sharpen and twitch. Nothing could hide from her nose, fueled as it was by determination.

Once, while eating at a mall food court, someone passing by bumped into her. She glared at them and sensed it immediately. "You're a faggot, aren't you?" The "closet" retreated as if suddenly exposed in front of stunned companions. Marina imagined that when this person got home, their wardrobes would fly open and flowered bandanas would come fluttering out. *Come out, come out!*

THE FIRST TIME MARINA SAW JIM, the brother of her husband Luis, she already knew. He moved "straight," but she saw the flick of his fingers, the way his eyes softened, the slight purse of his lips. When he walked, it was like he was balancing on a wire. "Luis, that brother of yours—he's eighteen and still hasn't courted anyone! It's a good thing that facial twitch is gone. Daddy, maybe your friend's American company can sponsor a hearing aid for Luis's brother. Let's help him so he can hear the voice of God better."

Jim struggled when he first wore the hearing aid in his left ear. He felt self-conscious because it was large, and even though it was skin-colored, it was still obvious. Fortunately, his hair was long enough to cover it somewhat. The first thing he heard was the high-pitched screech of feedback, like a nail being dragged across a blackboard. Then came a rattling drone, sounding like a swarm of bees fighting. Sometimes his own voice was too loud because he thought he wasn't being heard, and other times other people's voices were deafening. He was no longer used to the world of sound. He developed a habit of leaning his left ear toward whoever was speaking.

But before long, when everything settled, a new world opened up—and like magic, sounds reappeared: cracks, creaks, thuds, and laughter. Despite his twitch, Jim couldn't help but smile. "See?" Marina told Jim. "Don't you feel reborn? That's exactly what will happen if you renounce your homosexuality!"

Marina burned the lewd magazines she found in Jim's closet. "Sin, sin!" She left a copy of the Bible on his bed, with the "necessary pages" marked with paper. She and Luis forced Jim to get a short haircut, even though long hair was the trend for young men back then; it made his hearing aid much more visible. Marina asked Oscar, her soldier brother, to help Jim "act like a

man." Oscar had a heavy jaw and a mole below his left nostril. He was busy arresting and torturing activists, but he said he would help. He said Jim needed to go through rigid training, like in the military, otherwise nothing would happen.

The training began a month after it was announced in the newspapers and on TV—September—that the entire country was being placed under Martial Law. "Not a military takeover," Oscar explained to Luis, "it's still a civilian government. But if it were up to me, it should be a military takeover. Our countrymen are stubborn. They need a punch, like this." Then he punched the air. "Hey, do I look like Muhammad Ali yet?"

In the first part of the training, Jim served Oscar like a senior officer, supposedly to "break his character into obedience." Furthermore, Oscar believed he now had the right to interfere in Jim's life because, if not for his family, Jim still wouldn't be able to hear. Jim cleaned Oscar's boots. He carried his gear. After that, Oscar made Jim march back and forth throughout the house. Whenever Jim's hips swayed, Oscar would bark at him. "No Marcelino faggots here! Straight shoulders, goddammit! Stop swaying, stupid! Oh, why are you crying? A man shouldn't have a soft heart! Are you going to start wearing dresses like those other men out there?" "I'm not a woman," Jim answered. "Is that so? Then why are you still so soft, you pigheaded good-for-nothing asshole? Do twenty push-ups, goddammit!" He treated Jim like one of the activists he captured. "Communist faggots! You are the dregs of society!"—even though Jim was only just beginning to learn the meaning of the words "activist" and "communist."

They often had interrogations. "Are you a piece of shit!" Oscar would ask, screaming right into Jim's hearing aid. "No, Sir." "Are you filthy?" "No, Sir." "Are you stupid?" "No, Sir." "That weapon of yours, that dick of yours—what is it for?" Jim didn't answer immediately. Oscar screamed the question again. "That dick of yours, what is it for?" Jim still didn't answer. Oscar struck him with a punch to the chest. Jim closed his eyes in pain. "For the pussy, say it!" Jim still couldn't say it. Oscar punched him again, so hard that Jim's hearing aid nearly flew off. Jim wanted to vomit from the pain. "What is that dick for?" "For the pussy," Jim said, his voice barely audible. "Louder! For the pussy! Louder! For the pussy!"

"We should watch 'bomba' (softcore) films! (Right?) To get you horny. A man should thrust immediately when he sees a woman. You're wasting that dick, just giving it away to men! It should be used for women!" Then Oscar whispered to Jim, his spit flying—"Do you know how many woman activists I've fucked, huh? Aren't you jealous?" "Don't you feel sorry for them?" Jim asked.

At UP (University of the Philippines), he often saw activists rallying, especially before Martial Law. There were classmates who invited him, but he always refused. "We are poor," Luis always said. Luis only agreed to let him enroll at UP after he promised not to join rallies. So he felt guilty, because he was taking AB History, and he knew he should be involved in events that would one day become part of history. "They aren't humans," Oscar replied. "They are the termites of society."

At home, Oscar's fierce face was always in front of Jim. When he got to UP, it was as if the Oscars had suddenly multiplied—soldiers were scattered all over campus; sometimes a dorm was raided, sometimes they chased students who suddenly rallied, sometimes they just watched. One of Jim's professors stopped showing up; some said he went underground, others said he was arrested. But they never saw him again. Throughout the campus, there was a prevailing prohibition against expressing feelings and beliefs; the truth could only be whispered, and if necessary, hidden—just like being gay.

After class, Jim would hurry home. The strictness on campus was the same as at home. One day, when he was struggling terribly, he mentioned to Luis that if their parents were still around, they wouldn't allow what Oscar was doing to him. During most of the training sessions, Luis was away at work; only Marina was there, so Luis didn't see everything. He thought about it and was troubled by what Jim told him, but he was also sure that if their parents were alive, they wouldn't want Jim to be gay. So he told Jim, "Just follow Oscar, I'll tell him to take it easy."

Once, after Jim's training, Luis and Oscar had a drinking session. They forced Jim to join, even though he could barely swallow any. Oscar told stories and bragged about the torture he did to the "communist dregs"—some were so young, students, wasting the money their parents spent to educate them. "But they're tough, in fairness. Put through water torture all night, fingernails pulled out, the whole body electrocuted, but the bastards still won't confess. What are they fighting for?" Oscar couldn't understand; why were they like that? "Are you going to die?" Oscar would yell at them. "You're going to die for the country?" They still wouldn't talk, until they finally died.

"Dregs just like the gays," Marina thought as she served beer and goat-meat appetizers to Luis and Oscar. "Our country needs to be cleaned." Just like the dream of Oscar and the military men like their father, so that the Philippines would be great again. To end poverty, corruption, and violence. That was the promise of the *Bagong Lipunan* (New Society). Luis admired Oscar. This was the soldier he had dreamed of becoming since he was a boy, but would never be. Oscar's family—the colonel father, the sister Marina—was the family he wished he had.

Oscar made Luis resign from the grocery and got him into a umbrella factory ("Thanks, brother-in-law!"), a higher position as a checker of workers. But in reality, Oscar ordered Luis to spy on his fellow workers, who apparently wanted to form a union ("Union-union, fuck them!"). A friend of Oscar's family owned the factory.

One day, Oscar arrived in a foul mood. Four activists imprisoned at the camp had escaped after a night of torture. Oscar and his group were blamed by their commanding officer. Besides this, he had just received a report from Luis; it looked like the union would still be formed at the factory he was spying on. "Bastards! Scumbags!" He turned his anger toward Jim, in their training. He struck Jim in the stomach every time he got an answer or an action wrong. And even when Jim did it right, he would still find something wrong—"Goddammit, are you stupid? Come on, you want to hit me? Why don't you hit me, you stupid sissy!" Even Luis looked on, worried because Jim was doubled over in pain—*Kuya, help*, his eyes said. But Luis could do nothing because Oscar said this was necessary if they wanted Jim to change; Oscar said he

knew what he was doing. And as for Marina, it was okay with her. She stood with her shoulders straight like a hanger. She was happy because Luis had just bought her her favorite Chinese powder (in a small metal case) that felt fine and soft when applied to the face. That was one of the things Luis always gave her when he was courting her.

Jim made another mistake in his answer. Oscar took a glass, urinated into it, and then handed the glass to Jim. "Drink it." They were shocked. Did Oscar think he was facing an activist prisoner? "We can do anything," Oscar said, "we are the ones in power. Drink it!" Jim still didn't budge. Oscar approached and poured the glass of urine onto Jim's face. Jim's hard face didn't flinch even as the urine dripped down. Luis stepped forward, pulled Oscar back, and punched him in the chest. Oscar was surprised, lost his balance, and stumbled back but didn't fall. Marina was also shocked. Jim saw what happened. He turned and went to the kitchen. They wondered what he was doing there. Oscar gave Luis a dark look, then yelled at Jim. "Act like a man, get back here!" When Jim emerged, he was holding a bolo knife (*itak*). Luis and Marina were stunned. Before they could stop him, he lunged at Oscar. Luckily, Oscar dodged. The knife hit the side of the door, leaving a large gash.

They were all horrified. Even Jim was scared, crying. Even the neighbor, Aling Bebang, peeked in because of the noise, carrying her one-eyed pet cat. Oscar just smirked, turned around, and left. Marina was seething with anger at Jim. Luis sent Jim to his room and put the knife away. But from then on, Oscar stopped interfering with Jim. Even Marina was quiet for a while. Oscar still visited, drank with Luis, put his arm around him, and said what happened was okay—he would still recommend Luis for a better job. Then he made remarks again about activists and gays being everywhere. But he stopped the training with Jim. However, whether outside or at school, whenever Jim saw a formation of soldiers on the street, the only thing he saw was Oscar.

Marina didn't give up. She and Luis dragged Jim to church. There, while stomping his feet and with a thundering voice, the pastor said that God created only Adam and Eve—there was nothing in the middle. His spit flew, as if spraying the gay people hiding in the pews. Jim recoiled and looked away. Marina sneered at him. "It's a sin," the pastor continued, "it's an abomination!" Then he threw the Bible at the people. "There, read it for yourselves if gays or tomboys are allowed in there! Leviticus Chapter 18, Verse 22! *Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind!*" The listeners were terrified, and if there were any among them hiding their gender, they were like cockroaches flushed out by insecticide, now squirming.

Jim turned off his hearing aid and looked up intently, contentedly just watching the pastor. Heaven.

IF IN HER WHOLE LIFE THERE WAS ONLY ONE THING MARINA HATED (gay people), there was also only one thing she loved: Luis. From the first time she saw him at the grocery where he worked, she knew she wouldn't stop until she had him. Marina was 22 then and Luis was 21. Marina was beautiful, especially because of her long hair that she always combed with a stiff brush; when she let it down from its usual bun, it made her striking. This was the only thing, besides the Chinese powder Luis later gave her, that softened her hard appearance.

She found out all the places Luis went. She pursued him, talked to him, brought him food and Bible verses, bombarded him with cards. *Merry Christmas. Happy New Year. Happy Valentine's Day. Happy Father's Day.* Even when there was no occasion. *Happy whatever day.* Marina was a good cook, she learned from her mother, and when she found out Luis's favorite was adobo, she cooked him different kinds of adobo, a different kind every day. It reached 39 kinds of adobo, until even in his sleep, Luis was whispering "adobo." His farts smelled of it. Finally, he got to the point where just the smell of adobo made him nauseous, so from then on he never ate it again. But he married Marina, and she cooked him her other delicious dishes.

Marina was hard to move. Even when she and Luis made love, she lay flat like an ironing board, and then Luis would enter her. And there always had to be a "pardon me." Luis always had to ask her first if she was okay, and Marina would nod. It was as if Luis was saying "anyone home?" before he could enter. Luis would shake and thrust, but Marina lay there unmoving. Marina only allowed the missionary position, so when she gave birth to Sally and Eric, after three years of thinking they couldn't have children, Luis once joked (Luis rarely joked), "Our children are the children of missionaries." Marina didn't laugh at the joke. And she still didn't change her position. If the world were to end and someone came back after more than thirty years of her and Luis being together, she would still be seen there, lying straight, waiting for Luis to enter.

What Marina didn't know was that it wasn't true that she was the first to like Luis. When Luis was 21, he often dreamed of a thin woman, with her back turned, with long hair. For several nights. The woman's back was just turned; she didn't move or speak.

One day, while Luis was working at the grocery, someone was looking for him—apparently a complaint about a purchase, for which Luis was the bagger. The thin woman's back was turned when Luis went to the counter. When she turned around, he was shocked; it was the woman in his dream. Although her hair was in a bun.

Was it destiny? Or a deep desire within Luis that was so intense it came true? He didn't know, but Marina, the woman with long hair whose back was turned in his dream, was the woman he married after only a year, and the only one he loved since then. Even though at first he was hesitant about her, because Marina was an AB Education graduate while he had to drop out to work. He always bought Marina beautiful hair clips because he knew she loved her long hair. Hair that Luis had come to love too, always kissing it even when Marina was asleep.

Since he was a child, dreams had been part of Luis's life. Here he always took shelter to escape the stings of reality. When his parents died in an accident, he dreamed that they were still very much alive, telling him, "It's okay, son, we're still here, you can make it." So despite the pain in his heart, he endured. He stopped studying to work and support Jim, and killed his long-held dream of becoming a soldier.

IN THOSE TIMES, JIM ALSO NO LONGER WANTED to be gay. It was so hard to be gay in this world. "Leave me alone, Sal Mineo!" He would rub chili juice on his hands whenever he was tempted to masturbate. He settled for just hanging around outside the old cinema in Cubao,

envious of those going in. At school, he avoided looking at handsome classmates. Did they notice his inescapable desire? The walls didn't want it, the tables didn't want it, the frogs didn't want it, Aling Bebang's one-eyed cat didn't want it—no one did. He wished his body was made of plastic that he could change at any time, turn into a man or a woman, whenever he wanted.

At the suggestion of a friend of Marina's, Jim agreed to try a faith healer (*albularyo*) in Balic-Balic, who promised that for an affordable price, he would remove the gayness from a man. Jim entered a black tent decorated with white stars and suns. The healer wore only a T-shirt and boxer shorts and held a candle. He promised Jim a "new you." Jim immediately smelled his foul breath. *A foul new me*, Jim thought. From outside, they could hear the song "Bagong Lipunan" playing from a truck distributing free nutribuns. *A new birth / A new life / A new nation, a new movement / In the new society.*

The healer made Jim lie down on a narrow wooden bed (*papag*), so narrow that Jim was afraid he might fall onto the dirty floor. The healer began in a man's voice, gravelly and hoarse, saying, "Leave him, leave Jim, get out of there!" The healer's foul breath was now accompanied by spit flying onto Jim. Jim couldn't move away for fear of falling. The healer's foul breath soon filled the entire tent so that anyone who smelled it, Jim thought, would forget their gender.

Before long, the healer suddenly spoke in a female voice—the voice of a young girl, sounding as if she were being squeezed. "Where am I?" it asked. "Where am I?" Jim just stared at the healer while he continued to speak in the girl's voice. Jim turned his hearing aid off and then back on again, thinking it might be defective. Or maybe the battery was low. But it was clear—the healer was speaking in a young girl's voice, which presumably meant the femininity that was once in Jim's body had now possessed the healer. "I'm sorry if I dwelled within you," the girl's voice continued to Jim. "I had no ill intentions. Now I will leave you and you can return to being a real man." "That's not true," Jim said to the healer, sitting up. "Nothing has changed! Only your voice." Then Jim hurried away.

After that, Marina and Luis sent him to a conversion therapy camp in Tagaytay, recommended by a fellow church member. Such things were rare then, and this was one of the first, so it was still cheap. It was modeled after what was done in America. They said your "broken character" would be repaired inside the camp. They said it was necessary to "achieve a happy family life." They said many had already been "cured" by the camp. A famous gay actor who was still gay but no longer "practiced" gay sex, only on screen. A gay couple who availed of the promo package—buy one, get two gays. Though only one of them was converted; the other remained very much gay. One who became terrified upon seeing naked men, and would squirm even seeing his own naked body in the mirror. One who committed suicide, but "at least he wasn't gay anymore." He went straight to heaven.

Ten of them, including Jim, were locked inside the camp for five days. Shorts were forbidden (shorts hide many "miracles"), exchanging phone numbers was forbidden (in case more than just numbers were exchanged), and two men were not allowed to be together in a confined space (in case "unholy miracles" occurred). Kneeling was only allowed for prayer. And the tongue—it must not be used for "lewd purposes."

Various sessions were held where, every time a member gave a "wrong" answer ("Yes, I masturbated. Yes, I had lewd thoughts when I saw a naked man. Yes, I still speak softly. Yes, Judy Garland and Diana Ross are my favorites."), they would pull their own hair and promise not to do it again.

The moderator forced them to find the "root" of their gayness in whatever happened when they were children. Maybe there was no father figure. Maybe their mother breastfed them for too long. Maybe they were made to play with dolls and jackstones. Maybe they "caught" it from a gay classmate or inhaled "gay air." The sessions often lasted all night, and in their exhaustion, they just gave the answers the moderator wanted to hear. "Do you want to stop being gay?" "Yes!" "Is being gay disgusting?" "Yes!" "Will you stop swaying your hips and looking at naked men?" "Not anymore!" "Are you a real man now?" "Of course!"

Every session ended with the moderator smiling from ear to ear. He looked like he had swallowed a large testicle. The participants, however—having gotten to know each other—met secretly in the corners of the camp, and there, while taking off their "Pray My Gay Away" T-shirts, they performed lewd acts, using their tongues in forbidden ways, still gloriously gay.

Chapter 3

JIM JUST HAPPENED TO PASS BY Q-MART beside an overpass in Cubao. He was about to cross the street to catch a jeepney back to UP, where he was staying in a dorm, when he saw a small group of "lightning performers." This was a common tactic for activists back then—brief, sudden performances in public places because such gatherings were prohibited.

Jim was graduating from UP with a degree in AB History. As much as possible, he avoided going home to the house he shared with Luis, especially when he knew Oscar was coming over for a drinking session.

Two men and two women, all wearing denim pants and T-shirts printed with *Makibaka, Huwag Matakot!* (Struggle, Do Not Fear!), were performing. Everyone moved with haste and breathlessness because the police could arrive at any moment. They were just finishing their song.

Even a bird with the freedom to fly Will weep if caged How much more a nation so beautiful That yearns to be free? Philippines, my beloved Cradle of my tears and suffering...

After the song, they shouted in unison: *Down with imperialism! Down with bureaucratic capitalism! Down with feudalism!*

The police arrived, and the group quickly scattered. Some people ran toward Jim, forcing him back against a wall. He was terrified, remembering the horror stories Oscar used to tell.

Leaning against the wall while people ran past him, the first thing he saw in the distance—amidst the chaos—were eyes; slanted eyes that looked as if they were drawn onto a face. It was Sam, looking at him too. Sam looked surprised to see him, wearing a turtleneck and

bell-bottom pants. As Sam crossed the street to approach him, he smiled, making his eyes disappear even more.

"Jim," he said as he drew near. "Sam," Jim replied, still in disbelief. Now that his grimace was gone, Jim's smile was wide. But it quickly faded as he became self-conscious about the hearing aid he was wearing. He resisted the urge to cover it with his hand.

In the nearly four years that had passed, Sam had grown taller. And more handsome. He moved with more confidence now. He was with companions whom he introduced to Jim; they had just come from the mall.

"It's noisy here," Sam said. He invited Jim to talk by the roadside and excused himself from his friends for a moment.

"How are you?" Sam asked immediately. "What course are you taking? Where are you studying?" Then he stopped, remembering that Jim couldn't hear. Jim shyly pointed to the hearing aid he was wearing. Sam smiled.

Although Sam was two years older, they were both graduating now because Sam's studies at La Salle had been delayed for two years due to an illness. Jim didn't ask what the illness was. Sam had followed his father's wish to take up business, even though his true passion was music.

A memory flashed in both of them—of Sam playing the guitar at a small park beside the Chinese hospital, under a baote tree. "Do you still play the guitar?" Jim asked. "Of course," Sam said. "But my father doesn't know. I have a bigger collection of records now. Want to see?"

MANY, MANY YEARS WOULD PASS since then, when everything would become one long parade of sounds and images, and what Jim would remember most were the countless records in Sam's studio apartment. It was like swimming in records—on the floor, the table, chairs, shelves, the bed, beside the turntable; Simon and Garfunkel, Rolling Stones, Joni Mitchell, Barbra Streisand, Francisco Tárrega, John Williams, and many others Jim didn't know. The covers were colorful. In the corner of the room, a classical guitar leaned like a king.

"Whenever Papa visits," Sam said, "I hide all of these with the landlady downstairs. Otherwise, he'd break them all. Luckily, he only visits twice a year."

If there were forbidden things inside Sam's studio apartment, Jim thought, it was the same in the world outside back then. He remembered their Philippine History teacher sadly telling them that history was unfolding at that very moment—while the rights of citizens were being suppressed and the mouths of those who opposed the current system were being muzzled. Jim still didn't join rallies, even though he no longer lived at home.

"Do you remember *The Sound of Silence*?" Sam asked. Then he sang the first line, "*Hello, darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again.*" Jim nodded, smiling. Sam still loved

Simon and Garfunkel, especially their latest record, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, although it was sad because it was also the reason the duo split up.

Sam took the *Bridge Over Troubled Water* record out of its sleeve, cleaned the surface with a flannel cloth, and placed it on the turntable. He lowered the needle.

the sweet harmony of the combined voices of Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel soared, sounding as if they were one.

*When you're weary, feeling small
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all
I'm on your side, oh, when times get rough
And friends just can't be found*

Unlike before at the park beside the hospital, Jim could now hear the music Sam was playing; they were swayed by it together. Suddenly, Jim loved his hearing aid.

Jim took Sam to the lagoon at UP. This was where he went whenever he felt sad or felt like an outsider in the world. Beside the dirty little creek stood two large acacia trees that grew close together, as if making a vow. Jim had stood before them many times, wondering what their story was—how they managed to remain inseparable despite the many years. Now, in front of these two trees as darkness slowly fell, Sam played the guitar for him. *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. And for the first time, Jim finally heard it. Sam said it was about memories of a place. The piece was difficult because it had to sound like two guitars playing. The thumb plucked the bass notes while the ring, middle, and index fingers simultaneously plucked the next three notes.

Truly, what Jim heard was like one guitar becoming two. He placed his hand on the guitar while Sam continued to play, just like before, so he could feel the vibration, even though he could hear now. Sam smiled at him as he kept playing. Jim smiled back, and everything returned—the small park beside the Chinese hospital, the balet tree, the music, the full moon. Jim knew then, as he watched and listened to Sam, that his feelings for him had never gone away. And he didn't need to understand why. How do you explain the full moon? Some say love is blind. In his case, it was deaf.

He wanted to hug Sam, to kiss him; and just as it happens when a lover faces the beloved, everyone else disappeared and it was only the two of them. Jim thought, if being gay meant loving Sam, then he accepted being gay with all his heart.

Once, while they were at the lagoon, Sam asked Jim if it was hard always wearing a hearing aid. Jim nodded. Sometimes it was still difficult to hear. Especially when the hearing aid got wet with sweat. So sometimes, he said, he turned it off. When all the sound vanished, he felt a sense of freedom.

Sam watched Jim closely, trying to understand what he said. Then he leaned in. He asked Jim to turn off the hearing aid. Jim did. Sam put cotton in both of his own ears. He held Jim by both hands. They stood facing each other now, both unable to hear.

For a few moments, they just stood there, looking at each other, listening to the silence. Jim gasped for breath when he realized that what he was hearing was the beating of their hearts, which, like the guitar, had become one.

Many, many years from then, when Jim would remember it all, he would think that they were both deaf then to the things happening around them—to the suppression and oppression his teacher taught them about, whether it was to gay people or other fellow citizens—hearing nothing but their own hearts. Did Sam love him? He didn't know.

That was when they saw people in a commotion, running. Jim turned on his hearing aid and they followed the crowd. At the Arts and Sciences Building, which was near the lagoon, many onlookers had gathered. An ambulance had just left, carrying the body of a gay student who had reportedly jumped from the 4th floor. A gay friend who had "outed" him was standing to one side. "I didn't mean it," he said crying to those gathered there, "I didn't mean it!" Years later, there would be reports that at night, a ghost would wander the hallways of that building.

Jim held Sam's hand, as if they were guilty. As if they were among those who pushed that gay student. As if, under the full moon and amidst the dispersing crowd, a secret had been revealed and could no longer be hidden. They were back in the real world. Who is gay? "I am not gay." That was what was written on Sam's terrified face. And Jim knew then that music cannot truly do everything. The moon has no power.

For several days, Sam didn't get in touch. While Jim nursed the ache in his chest, he reported in class that it is everyone's duty to be involved—that for every person who dies around us, whether murdered or by suicide, we are a part of it. He felt moved to join student rallies and shouted slogans against the violation of student rights, wrote struggle-themed graffiti on walls, raised his fist, and held placards.

One day, Sam suddenly arrived at the dorm, starving and inviting him to eat dim sum. It was as if they hadn't been apart for long. The slogans, graffiti, and placards suddenly vanished from Jim's mind.

Sam took him to a small, hot restaurant in Ongpin. Sam ordered *machang* for both of them—"one of the few things I like about being Chinese." He let Jim smell its aroma.

On a napkin, Sam wrote his Chinese name. *Tan Sun Tiong*, meaning "The Obedient One." Then he wrote it in Chinese characters. Jim studied the Chinese characters, the black lines crisscrossing. Then he tried to imitate them. The lines he wrote were messy. They both laughed. "Just write your name," Sam said. Jim wrote his full name. *Jaime Marcelino*. "Jaime," Sam said, as if it was the first time he had truly heard Jim's name.

Two Chinese men who were very flamboyant in their actions entered the restaurant. The other diners stared at them. Jim watched to see what Sam's reaction would be. Sam ate his *machang* for a moment, then began to tell a story.

In Chinese folklore, he said, homosexuality is common. Often, the chosen partners of *xian* or animal spirits are of the same sex, usually younger men. They were allowed to live together on earth until the time came when the Lord of the Fairies had to end their union.

"Interesting," Jim said. "I didn't know about those things."

"There is also Tu Er Shen," Sam continued. A god who oversees the love between men. He is also called the Rabbit God. According to the story, there was a handsome teenage commoner in Hokkien province during the early years of the Qing Dynasty, Hu Tianbao, who became infatuated with a handsome Manchurian officer from Beijing. He followed the officer everywhere—from the camps to the government offices, even on his tours to neighboring towns.

The officer grew angry and had Hu arrested. When Hu admitted he was in love with the officer, the officer heartlessly had him beaten to death. In the underworld, the gods there felt pity for Hu. They said: "You committed no crime except to love a fellow man, and an official at that, even though you were just an ordinary person." To right the wrong done to Hu, they named him Tu Er Shen, the Rabbit God, who would become the guardian of love between men. A month after that, he visited the village elder in a dream and asked for a temple to be built for him so that people could offer incense and prayers, in exchange for his guidance and protection. The temple was built with the help of devotees. Many of these temples are gone now, but there is still one in Taiwan that is visited by thousands of gays and gay lovers every year.

"I hope we can go there someday," Jim thought. But was Sam really gay? He wanted to ask. *Do I have a chance? Us?*

But Sam had gone back to his food.

As they left the restaurant, some street children approached them, and Jim remembered the street children from before, beside the Chinese hospital. One of the children was whining, a dirty hand tugging at Sam's polo shirt. "Wait," Sam said. He went back into the restaurant and after a few moments came out with wrapped *siopao*, which he gave to the children.

Jim watched them happily.

After the children left, Sam saw that Jim was still smiling at him. "I've been doing this for a long time," Sam said. "Back home in Iloilo, I used to let beggar children into the house and feed them. Papa would get angry whenever he found out."

Then Sam laughed, finding joy in those small acts of rebellion against his father.

Sam took Jim back to the dorm in a taxi. They had many bags of food and good luck trinkets from Ongpin.

When they reached the dorm, they saw a commotion. Soldiers had just conducted a raid and a student had been arrested. His books, allegedly subversive and from China, were confiscated.

Even his *Red Book* and Mao cap. Jim had been with this student at a rally once, but they weren't friends. Sam asked if Jim was okay. Jim nodded.

Sam was about to leave when Jim saw Luis and Marina arriving. Jim felt nervous. "We've been here for a while but you weren't here," Luis said, "so we ate first." Marina had brought some rice cakes she had made for Jim.

Jim introduced Sam to Luis and Marina. "Hi," Sam said. Jim knew Marina's "gaydar" went off immediately. "You don't study here at UP? How did you meet Jim? Are you Chinese? Where is your family?" Those were the questions, but the real question was, *Are you gay?*

After Sam left ("Sorry, I have an early class tomorrow, nice meeting you."), Marina said immediately that she could smell that Sam was gay from a mile away. "Me too," Jim said in a low voice. Marina was silent for a few moments. Luis looked at Jim sternly.

After a few moments, Marina said they had visited because they had an important purpose. Jim grew nervous. *Help me, Tu Er Shen, help me.* They said they wanted to introduce him to a woman, a fellow member of Marina's religious congregation.

Jim looked at Marina. "I'm not interested in women." "Just try," Marina said. "Just do it for your sister," Luis added. Jim thought of the sacrifices Luis had made for him. And that if it weren't for Marina's father, he wouldn't have a hearing aid. Jim nodded half-heartedly. "You'll like her, Jim," Marina said.

JIM GOT DRESSED THE NEXT MORNING, THEN STOPPED. Could he really pretend? What if he didn't get dressed up so he'd turn the woman off? What if he didn't bathe? Wear his ugliest clothes? Tell her, "Sorry, I can't hear anything, I left my hearing aid at home"?

He waited at the agreed-upon restaurant. He kept taking deep breaths so he wouldn't be nervous. Really, what would he and his female date do? Talk about their male crushes? He imagined the scene—the two of them naked in a room while the woman chased him.

The woman arrived. In fairness, she was beautiful. The kind of beauty a model has. Some men at other tables looked at her immediately. She was wearing a plunging tank top and a short skirt. She had a small bag. She looked at Jim. She smiled. Was she pleased or amused by what she saw? Then she sat down.

"I'm Jane," she said. "Jim," Jim said.

"Jane and Jim," she said. "We could start a parlor." Then she laughed. She laughed loudly. "Let's not waste time," she said. "I know why we're here. Your sister matched you with me. Because you're gay."

Jim was surprised. "Don't worry," Jane said. "You're cute, but I like women. So we're even. They think I'll be 'corrected' if I date a man. Idiots. But let's just go along with it. We'll go out a few

times. My brother gave me money for expenses, did yours too? That's good. Let's make money off them."

Jane took a photograph out of the wallet in her bag. "This is me and my girlfriend. She's graduating this year. Nursing. Is she beautiful? Don't you dare say no, or I'll hit you!"

Jane put the photo back in her wallet and the wallet back in her bag. "How about you, have you tried being with a woman?"

Jim was startled by Jane's question. He couldn't answer.

"I'm just being frank, don't be shocked. I think you're a virgin. It shows. Me, I've tried being with a man. No offense meant, but men think that when they're with you, they just enter a hole. What are we, caves? So since then, my vagina is only for women."

Jim was shocked by what he heard; he still couldn't react.

"There, you're thinking my mouth is dirty. That 'dirt' is only in people's minds. Me, I call a spade a spade. Why would you say, 'your thing,' 'my thing.' Vagina. Cunt. Cock. Dick. We all have them, what's there to be ashamed of? Does it lessen one's dignity? If you want, I'll shout it here in the restaurant!"

"Have you ever thought," Jane continued, "why most of the words they call vulgar in Tagalog are always only four letters? Me, I don't know yet. Hey, say something. Is it good being gay? If I know, it's not."

Jane told stories. "Sometimes I think, I wish there was an island, one even more beautiful than Matabungkay, where only lesbians lived. Sorry, no gay men allowed. Just all of us, creating our own society."

"But how would you have children?" Jim finally managed to interject.

"Some of us would volunteer to go out and get pregnant. Then come back when they're 'preggy'."

"So you still need men after all," Jim said.

"On our own terms," Jane said. "Men aren't our enemies. They can visit, but the child-rearing—that's ours."

"Have you heard the story about the drowning tomboy and the gay man?" Jane asked. "Not yet," Jim said. Jane told the story. There was once a drowning tomboy and a gay man. The moralists on the ship were discussing who to save first—the tomboy or the gay man. They discussed and discussed: who has more value to society, the tomboy or the gay man? Who helps our progress more? While they were busy discussing, both the tomboy and the gay man drowned!

Jane took him back to the dorm. She had a second-hand car. In the lobby, they were more relaxed with each other. Jane kept laughing loudly. Then she told Jim, "Those relationships—gay, lesbian, straight, whatever—in the end, they're up to the person. We have no obligation to others to be who we don't want to be."

Then Jane held him by the neck and kissed him on the lips, playfully. She lingered for a moment and Jim didn't resist. "Well, did you feel anything?" she asked when she pulled away. "Did your dick get hard?" Then she laughed very loudly and said goodbye.

That was when Jim saw Sam at the gate. Sam had just arrived; they didn't have plans that day, but he probably came to visit. He was shocked to see Jane kissing him. He turned away immediately. Jim chased Sam, but he had already gotten into a waiting taxi.

HE HAD BEEN KNOCKING ON THE DOOR OF SAM'S STUDIO apartment for a long time before Sam opened it. Sam immediately turned his back on him. He went to the side table and played a record. *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. He just stood there listening to the music.

They were like that for a moment. Sam was listening, and Jim was standing there, waiting for Sam to speak to him.

Sam began to speak, unable to look at Jim, struggling and stammering while *Recuerdos* continued to play, sounding like a soft background to his words. He said his father had come to Manila that afternoon. He surprised him. He saw the turntable, the records, and the guitar, but said nothing about them. Instead, he said something else. *Kai-siao*. An arranged marriage between Sam and the daughter of a business partner. *Be ho di khan-tsiu*. He was to be married. Everyone in his family was female—his *ah-tsi* (older sister), his *ah-koh* (little aunt), and his *tua-koh* (big aunt). He was the only male, their only hope to continue their lineage. After the wedding, he would also take over their business in Iloilo, since he was graduating.

Sam resisted. His father shouted at him. They had noticed for a long time that he acted like a *tsa-boa* (woman). "It's disgusting! We will lose face. You will shame our ancestors."

"You will get married," Sam's father repeated. "Your *ah ma* (grandmother) in China is sick. She wants a great-grandchild."

Recuerdos ended. Sam began to cry. "I don't want to get married. I don't!"

Jim held Sam by the back of the neck. Sam couldn't stop crying even more. Jim wiped away his tears. And then he kissed his slanted eyes. They were still wet.

When Jim pulled his face back, they looked at each other. Their lips were talking—would they meet? Would they finally accept who they were, what they were? Jim's lips approached tentatively; Sam's lips twitched slightly. It was as if a stronger force pulled them and almost simultaneously their lips opened and they kissed. Sam's lips sucked Jim's as if refusing to let go. Jim could taste Sam's sweet saliva.

When their lips parted, Sam looked at him with all his love. Then he whispered in his ear; Jim felt his warm breath. *Gua ai di*, Jaime. I love you.

Jim closed his eyes. He felt Sam hug him and enclose him in his arms—the safest place in the whole world, the arms of your beloved.

He just felt Sam undressing him. When he opened his eyes, he was naked. Sam gazed at his nakedness. Jim wanted to be happy and he wanted to be afraid. Sam undressed as well, and Jim looked at him in turn. It was as if it was the first time he had seen a man's body. Their chests, thighs, and genitals were talking. They were both shy and trembling. A mix of the known and the unknown.

Sam was bolder. He hugged him and their naked bodies pressed together. Their chests, thighs, and genitals no longer needed words. When Sam laid him down on the bed, he repeatedly blew into Jim's ear, as if wooing his sense of hearing. He licked his nipples, each one. He took Jim's hand and placed it between his thighs. Horses raced inside Jim and he couldn't breathe. Sam kissed every part of Jim's body—his Adam's apple, his chest, his groin—as if every part he kissed became his forever. These were parts of his body that Sam had too. They journeyed through the similarity of their bodies. From within them came a small, unexpressible cry, because in this meeting of their naked bodies, they both found freedom.

FROM THEN ON, THEIR MEETINGS BECAME MORE FREQUENT. Often in secret, because their "covers" were gone. Sometimes Sam would pull Jim's head and whisper the words again, *gua ai di*, Jaime. And Jim would repeat, *gua ai di*, Sam. Sam offered to get Jim a new hearing aid, a more expensive and better one—he had the money. But Jim refused; what he had was enough. They went to the UP lagoon again; Sam brought a Polaroid Instant Camera and asked a man there to take their picture. They watched the photo develop—Sam had his arm around him under the acacia tree, both smiling, Sam's eyes gone. Sam kept the only copy, and years later Jim would sometimes think that he should have asked for it. Sam had asked Jim to write his address at the dorm and at their house on the back of the photo. "Someday," Sam said, "I still want to get to know your family better." They both planned to write a diary—each would record what they did every day, then they'd compare entries. But they never did it, because Sam found it hard—it was handwritten, and he had never kept a diary. Sam bought Jim many records—ones they knew and also ones by singers they didn't know, exploring other music. Jim bought Sam a pick, which Sam never used because he still preferred using his fingernails on the guitar. He played classical guitar for Jim all night long. They both dreamed of a world and a time when they could be together, where they no longer had to hide.

"I will introduce you to my friends. I will proudly call you my boyfriend. And I will kiss you in front of them."

"We will celebrate our anniversary and Valentine's Day, but every day will be special."

"We will wear matching clothes."

"I will always play the guitar for you, even in front of other people."

"No one will ask if we are gay."

"We will pray at the Rabbit God temple in Taiwan."

"We will be together until we are 60, 70, 80 years old. Even when our eyes are blurry and we're infirm. But I will still never tire of kissing you."

"And even if I have a hearing aid, I won't hear anything else but you."

Gua ai di, Jaime. *Gua ai di*, Sam. "Let's run away." "What?"

Jim looked at Sam in surprise. "Let's run away," Sam repeated. "Let's leave them all behind." Now Sam was excited. "I've saved some money. We'll go to a far-off province, somewhere no one knows us."

"They'll find us eventually," Jim said.

"It will take time," Sam said. "And even if they find us, they won't be able to do anything. They have to accept us now."

"Why," Jim joked, "because I'm pregnant?"

"Yes," Sam replied. "And I have to take responsibility for you."

Both laughed.

"You should carry my name," Sam said. "You should carry my name too," said Jim. "We will carry both our names," said Sam.

As time passed, Jim would still remember those dreams of theirs. Sam waited for his answer, excitedly looking at him with his slanted eyes. "So, do you agree, shall we run away?"

Jim looked at Sam. He wanted to smile, and then his eyes disappeared. "Yes," he said. Sam smiled and his eyes disappeared too.

WHEN THE DAY OF THEIR ESCAPE ARRIVED (it was timed for Good Friday, April 14, so it wouldn't be obvious they were absent from class), Jim dressed early. He put a few clothes in a bag. He thought about whether to leave a note for Luis. Better not.

He arrived early at the meeting place by the overpass near Q-Mart in Cubao, where they had met before. Almost everyone was out of town, having gone home to their respective provinces. Not far away, there was a Lenten procession; a bloodied Christ was being hoisted onto a cross. Meanwhile, on the side, a child in a tattered t-shirt with holes was singing *Bagong Lipunan*, and because he had no pants, his dark little organ was hanging out.

An hour passed. A group of four activists suddenly performed a lightning rally, even though only a few people were watching them. They said the killing of Christ was the same as the killing of our human rights, the killing of us all.

Just like before, they were chased by the police and scattered. One of them left a red slipper in the sewer. Jim looked at it sadly. The sewer seemed unwilling to accept the slipper, repeatedly washing it against the cement.

More hours passed. Jim remained standing there. Waiting. When it began to grow dark, it only then occurred to him that maybe Sam wasn't coming.

He worried that something might have happened. He couldn't sleep. He waited for Sam to call the dorm. He didn't. The next morning, very early, he pleaded to use the phone in the lobby. He managed to call Sam's landlady, but a party line interrupted. "Please, get off the line, we are using the phone". Jim pleaded that his was also an emergency, but the party line wouldn't agree. "We all have emergencies we're calling about," it said.

So Jim looked for a payphone outside. He found one, but the line was long. And he realized he hadn't brought any coins. So he decided to just go to Sam's studio apartment.

The landlady, who happened to be in the lobby, was the one he spoke to. She said Sam had just left. This noon was his flight to China.

Shocked, Jim searched for a taxi. What was happening, how did it happen? When the taxi got near the airport, he saw there was traffic, so he quickly got out and ran. He ran fast, gasping for breath, pushed by the spirits of Tu Er Shen and the Lord of the Fairies, shouting for the support of the gods of gayness and of rabbits, panting as he arrived in front of the airport and squeezed through the passengers getting out of cars, carrying their many suitcases, most of whose contents they didn't even need.

There at the entrance, he saw Sam had just shown his passport and ticket to the guard. With him was a beautiful Chinese woman, quite small. Sam looked at Jim and they locked eyes before he turned away and entered. Jim was left staring as Sam finally disappeared.

Chapter 4

...a hustler after all. There was another who turned out to be from the seminary; when Jim began to kiss him, he immediately knelt and asked for forgiveness for the sin he was about to commit. Then, with eager lips, he immediately took Jim's member into his mouth. The scent of semen drifted in the air.

They had to be quick because they might be hit by the flashlights of the police, and so they would run with their pants almost falling off. If you get caught, you'll be jailed all night, laughed at ("Are you a faggot?"), degraded ("Give me a blowjob!"), and extorted for money.

They were just like the activists chased by water cannons and batons during rallies and jeepney strikes, then taken to the precinct. There, they would also be hurt and degraded, especially if found to be gay. ("Kiss each other! With tongues out! You don't want to? Isn't this what you want? Do you want to be hurt again?")

Jim was terrified back then. He was one of those caught but wasn't outed as gay. He was let go. He lived a double life then. By day, a new teacher at UP teaching the history of our country, occasionally joining fellow teachers and students in rallies. Whenever someone asked if he was gay, his answer was evasive. Because if you were found out, the treatment toward you would change. Like when they found out he had a hearing impairment, they would adjust the way they spoke; even though he had a new hearing aid, they would still shout.

At night, he was in the grass at Mehan Garden, free to be whoever he was. Or he would return to the old cinema in Cubao (*Hello, darkness, my old friend.*) and there seek refuge again in the blessed hands of strangers in the dark. Sometimes he returned to the Q-Mart overpass in Cubao, even if he no longer saw anyone performing there. The only place he didn't return to was the lagoon at UP. He didn't want to hear the music there. He might hear someone whispering to him again. *Gua ai di, Jaime (I love you, Jaime).*

He dreamed of Sam. He said he returned, that the wedding didn't go through. Crying, he embraced him, but when he woke up, only tears were there.

IN 1976, WHEN HE HEARD ON THE TAXI RADIO that Sal Mineo was killed at age 37. After two Oscar nominations for the films *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Exodus*, he struggled with his career, possibly due to the constant rumors that he was gay. In an interview, he said he couldn't understand it; at first, movie offers were overflowing, now suddenly no one wanted him. One night in front of a grocery store, he was robbed and stabbed several times, an unrecognized actor. His longing eyes were closed forever.

Jim hurriedly got out of the taxi, not knowing what to do. He stood on the street for a moment. After that

he quickly looked for a taxi again, went to the old cinema in Cubao, the place where he first watched Sal Mineo.

It was about five in the afternoon. He sat in a corner inside the cinema and began to remember Sal Mineo. He didn't notice whatever was playing on the screen. He was grieving. But before thirty minutes could pass, the show suddenly stopped, the film on the screen was burning, curling, and turning brown before finally disappearing.

The lights returned to the cinema. Some viewers were shouting in anger, banging the wooden chairs, then cursing as they walked out, demanding their money back.

Jim remained seated, not knowing what to do. It felt like someone had died again. He felt someone approach him and speak. A man's voice. He said the movie wouldn't continue. They were trying to fix it, but the projector broke.

Jim turned to the speaker. He was handsome. Brown-skinned and tall. Smiling. There was no one else left in the cinema.

"Dale," the man introduced himself.

If music brought Sam to Jim, movies brought Dale.

Dale knew John Ford, Judy Garland, Rock Hudson, James Dean, Montgomery Clift, and other old Hollywood actors. Especially Montgomery Clift,

whom many said he looked like, a kind of dark handsomeness that seemed to always hide a secret sadness. Whenever their movies were shown, he would rush to the cinema. He also knew Sal Mineo and knew about his tragic life and death. He had memorized famous lines from Hollywood movies (*I will never be hungry again! Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me? Fasten your seat belts! It's gonna be a bumpy night!*).

At first, Jim didn't immediately agree to be in a relationship with Dale. He had been hurt by Sam and didn't want to love again.

So Dale persisted. He visited Jim at his rented room. He brought Choc Nut and fruit. He shared news about new hearing aid technology he read about. He accompanied him to rallies even if he didn't believe in them. He asked Jim if he knew the legend about the man without a heart. He said no.

Dale told the story. Long ago in Greece, there was a man without a heart, who didn't know how to love. "I will make you love me," a persistent suitor said. "Nothing will happen," said the heartless man. So the suitor said, "I will walk a thousand miles every day for you." And he did. On the seventh day, he was exhausted and could hardly walk, but he still continued. Until he was about to collapse. He was immediately caught and embraced by the

heartless man. But it was too late. He died in the arms of the man without a heart. From then on, as penance, the heartless man walked a thousand miles every day. Until he himself collapsed and died. He was buried next to his suitor.

"That's how I am," Dale said to himself, not letting Jim hear. He just smiled at Jim after telling the story.

One afternoon they watched *A Place In the Sun* in a double program at an old cinema. Jim kept teasing Dale that he really looked like one of the stars, Montgomery Clift. Dale just shrugged off what Jim said, but inside he was overjoyed that it was Jim who said it. He thought for a long time that he wished it were true. He removed from his mind the article he read saying that before long, Montgomery Clift's career dimmed because of a car accident and rumors of him being gay. He died in 1966 at age 45.

Dale invited him to have dinner at his apartment. There, after eating, Dale mentioned he read once that on the set of *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean told the director to tell Sal that

when Sal looks at James, he should imitate how James looks with full love at Natalie Wood, the female lead.

Jim looked at Dale, and saw there, as he looked at him, the same longing in

Sal's eyes. Jim didn't know if what he felt was pity or love, but he held Dale's hand. Dale pulled him and kissed him.

Their lovemaking was without hesitation, unlike before with Jim and Sam. They both knew what they wanted and what they were doing. As if in a journey, they had already visited these lands. And there were no roles to play. Sometimes Dale was on top, and sometimes Jim. Two equal travelers.

Since Jim moved in with Dale, he became more open about his identity. Whenever someone asked if he was gay, he would say yes without hesitation. It was like being liberated over and over again.

In class, Jim taught his students how gay people in the Philippines, if not made invisible, were condemned—from the androgynous *bayog* and *asog* shamans of pre-colonial times, to the gays and other members of the gay liberation movement of these times.

Once, a co-teacher of Jim disappeared, abducted by the military. He had just come from class and stopped by the grocery to buy something. When he came out, he was ambushed by soldiers in civilian clothes. "Are you Professor Mendoza?" "Yes, why?" The grocery items spilled onto the floor. In Jim's class, for several days, that incident and state violence were all they talked about, and several times, what Jim remembered was

Oscar, and his stories from before. In this country, said one of Jim's militant students, it is so easy to make you disappear and erase you.

JIM AND DALE'S SCHEDULE WAS REGULAR. Morning: breakfast while reading the newspaper and exchanging opinions, which sometimes led to heated discussions, so they would leave for Dale's office and Jim's school without saying goodbye.

Lunch: checking in over the phone, "have you eaten?" And if they had a heated discussion that morning, they would race to be the first to say sorry.

Night: they would watch for any old Hollywood movie on TV, eating popcorn while wearing matching pajamas. Then, before sleeping, Dale would clean Jim's ears to remove the earwax that would affect his hearing aid, while Dale recounted how at the office, some woman was making advances at him again, saying she still liked him even if he was gay, so he was frank and said he already had a boyfriend. "Maybe you like her too," Jim teased Dale, "ha, maybe," then he tickled him, so Dale tickled him back, and they chased and tickled each other laughing loudly throughout the living room.

Every Sunday they ate at Dale's parents' house. They were kind to Jim. They always thanked Jim, because they said it was only then they saw

Dale so happy. Jim, at last, had found a new family. He rarely went home to his own. Dale's family was who he was with every Christmas, New Year, and other occasions.

Dale was stingy. A regular at bargain sales and flea markets, haggling was a battlefield for him; even if he only won a few cents, it was enough to make him smile. He would only spend if it was for a movie, and now, if it was for Jim. If they hadn't met in the cinema, Dale surely would have asked for a refund.

Most of his clothes were second-hand. (Once when Jim bought him a new and expensive polo and pants, he was deeply touched, but also said that next time Jim shouldn't spend so much, especially on him.) He didn't throw away even empty bottles. He squeezed the toothpaste to the very end. Even old toothbrushes, he found a use for. Not even a cent could be taken from him in grocery change. He didn't tip in restaurants. He took home the complimentary toiletries from the hotels where they had work seminars. He pocketed the free candy and chiclets in lobbies and waiting rooms. Everything was kept in a large jar in the living room.

"Hoarder," that's what he called himself. "The right word is *bodegero* (warehouse keeper)," Jim said. "My dear *bodegero*," Jim would say while they made love. Yes, Dale would think

years and years from then, he was a *bodegero* of things, love, memories.

He was the one who arranged their clothes in the closet, meticulously organized, almost needing labels. Even Jim's teaching materials, books, notebooks, pens. Cotton swabs for cleaning Jim's hearing aid and its case. Even the records Sam gave Jim long ago were arranged alphabetically in boxes in the next room.

He was used to this. In the company where he worked as an accountant, he was the same; he was the one who cleaned up the mess and dirt of their accounts. "How will we survive without Dale?" his boss always said. He knew it was just consolation because the boss felt guilty for passing everything he couldn't do to Dale since he was always on vacation with his model mistress.

Jim and Dale only fought once. When they ate at a restaurant and the waitress's voice was soft, Dale asked Jim if he heard her, pointing to Jim's hearing aid. Jim felt offended and lost his appetite. He didn't speak to Dale the whole day.

DURING THOSE TIMES, EXPERIMENTATION WAS IN VOGUE in everything—sex, culture, clothing, life. And they went along. They smoked marijuana in the bathroom. They watched concerts by Pinoy Rock and Pinoy protest bands like Juan de la Cruz and Banyuhay. Together with some of

Dale's co-workers, mostly gay, they celebrated when Melanie Marquez won Miss International in 1979. They went skinny dipping at parties. They had sex in unexpected places like restaurant

bathrooms, on top of a truck, by the roadside after a rally, behind a hero's monument. Anywhere but the UP Lagoon. They tried to join an orgy in a condominium in Quezon City but they couldn't go through with it. Dale laughed and laughed. Jim took Dale to the old cinema in Cubao, where he first experienced sex. Dale challenged Jim to reenact everything they did there, but they couldn't because the place had become a place of worship. So they just reenacted it at home. They pretended their house was an old cinema while *The Big Boss* played on the Betamax.

They went to gay bars. On a streamer in front of one bar it was written: *We Need Your Votes, It's Erection Time!* After paying the entrance fee they went inside. They looked behind a large mirror at a group of young men all in briefs, with numbered tags. Their faces were expressionless. The mirror was one-way so they couldn't see the people choosing them. Dale felt pity, unable to look.

"Here," the gay manager told Jim and Dale, "you can have your fill of fondling, timed sessions, pounding, you name it, we got it. That one there," pointing to a call boy among those sitting behind the glass, "don't

bargain with greatness, it's bulging. He has heavy-duty equipment. That other one, Balbonic Beauty, hairy all over even the nipples, just add 50 and you can blow him. Our young boys here are all well-endowed, all eight-inchers, and they can sing and dance too. It's safer here than hunting for street boys in Cubao. So go on, take your pick!"

But Jim and Dale didn't take anyone; they felt pity, so they just drank, just watched the macho dancers. Sometimes the macho dancers sat in a row on a small stage, expressionless as they masturbated in front of everyone to the sound of rasping old rock music. Jim watched Dale, who looked down, unable to watch. He held his hand.

Once, a gay female impersonator as Spiderman inserted a string into his own rear and then crawled while tying the string to nails in various parts of the bar until he formed a large web that trapped him, which in the end he also destroyed as an act of liberation from his poverty, oppression, and sexuality. Both Jim and Dale smiled. Not long after, a filmmaker, Nick Deocampo, made a short film about it.

They went to a very hidden gay bar on Claro M. Recto. An iron gate had to be opened to enter. There was a brawny and strict guard holding an iron rod. After climbing the

narrow stairs, there was another iron gate that had to be opened again. Just on the stairs, you could smell an unrecognizable scent. Inside the bar, the light was dim; only the glow of cigarettes and eyes could be perceived. The emcee spoke over the loudspeaker, telling everyone to wait for their Special Show at two in the morning, "so, come one, come all, oh come all ye faithful!"

The Special Show was a live sex act by two macho dancers. Both were completely naked. One had beads implanted in his member. He mounted the one crouching down and started their live sex act while flickering red light sprayed over their faces, to the tune of the song *Manila* by Hotdog, which Jim heard intermittently because his hearing aid was feeding back.

Manila, I keep coming back to Manila Simply no place like Manila Manila, I'm coming home

The man crouching down looked at Jim as his head moved up and down due to the violent thrusts of the one on top. His face had no expression. "Is he hurting?" Jim thought. "Ashamed? Bored? Does he see something? Does he see me?"

Memories returned—Oscar and his training, the folk healer in Balic-Balic, the conversion therapy camp in Tagaytay, the running of gay men being caught in the grass at Mehan Garden. Suddenly Jim felt nauseous.

Jim felt sick. Dale quickly assisted him, and in the bathroom, he vomited the past.

From then on, their trips to bars became rare. More often they stayed in the apartment, just the two of them.

BEFORE THEY SLEPT, DALE WOULD SAY, "I LOVE YOU." Jim didn't know how to answer so he just didn't. Dale didn't expect anything. He knew Jim loved him, except for a few minutes a day, or a few hours a week, when Sam would return to Jim's mind, his slanted eyes looking at him with total sadness.

At those times, Jim would turn his gaze elsewhere in the apartment to make the image disappear; but he would hear the music instead, even though they never played the records in the other room again. Even if his hearing aid was off. He heard it in every corner of the apartment like a guest that had slipped in, overstaying and refusing to leave. *Recuerdos de la Alhambra. Bridge Over Troubled Water. The Sound of Silence.* And so he would feel Sam's warm breath on his ear again. *Gua ai di, Jaime.*

Sometimes he couldn't take it and would rush to the UP lagoon, sitting there in front of the two sworn acacia trees, hearing aid off, listening to the music of the past. It was

more painful to think about what didn't happen than what did. Before long, Dale would fetch him and bring him home.

He wanted to forget Sam. But does the heart know how to forget? Even though he had given space in his heart for Dale, Sam still wouldn't leave the larger space there.

Once Dale got drunk, and Jim saw two broken records on the floor. *Bridge Over Troubled Water* and *The Sound of Silence* by Simon and Garfunkel. Jim knew why. He helped the drunk Dale to bed. He wiped his body. He stroked his head, neck, and face. Then he kissed him. A kiss of a little love and much gratitude.

The next afternoon, Jim saw Dale trying to glue the broken records back together, though he wasn't very successful. And another afternoon, he saw that Dale had bought new copies, properly placed in their old spot.

SOMETIMES DALE THOUGHT, IS THE WORLD HE SHARED WITH JIM TOO CROWDED, with Sam always squeezed in there? There were nights he wanted to embrace Jim while he was dreaming and whispering Sam's name; he wanted to say to him, "Give me your dreams, even your nightmares, I wish it were my name you would call."

He didn't know if what he felt was still love or if it was obsession. Why he looked for

"Jimness" in everything. He wanted to remind himself, like what he read in self-help books, "love yourself first." But isn't it true that when you love someone, it's like loving yourself too? Isn't it that sometimes, we have no choice as to what kind of life will make us happy? And he was happy; only now had he ever been this happy. He didn't see it as weakness but as a surrender, a sacrifice. He had accepted that he was the one there, but the one who wasn't there carried more weight for Jim.

ONE AFTERNOON, UNINTENTIONALLY OR PERHAPS BY THE HAND of a playful fate, while Jim and Dale were walking on Claro M. Recto, Jim suddenly stopped. Dale was puzzled. Jim was looking straight ahead. There, a Chinese man also stopped, his eyes very slanted. He was with a Chinese woman.

"Jim," the man greeted Jim. Jim couldn't answer immediately. He turned to Dale. "Sam," he said to Dale. Sam smiled at Dale. His eyes disappeared.

They decided to go to a nearby coffee shop. Jim and Dale sat together, and Sam and his companion sat across from them. Sam introduced her. "My wife," he said.

Jim nodded, then pointed to Dale. "My boyfriend," he said. Sam smiled slightly. Sam's wife also smiled. She was pretty, small, and also had slanted

eyes. Jim remembered, this was the woman Sam was with at the airport before.

Sam was wearing a suit and tie. He said they were from a business meeting. That's why they were here in Manila. But they still lived in Iloilo. Then he smiled and his eyes disappeared again.

Jim and Dale, meanwhile, were wearing t-shirts with their two faces on them. (Jim had them made as a surprise for Dale on his birthday.) Jim wondered if Sam noticed his hearing aid was different now, smaller.

Sam ordered coffee for him and his wife, whose name was Amy. "Coffee for us too," Jim said. "Are you sure you don't want even a sandwich?" Sam asked. "No, thanks," Dale said.

They fell silent while waiting for the orders. Blondie's *Call Me* was playing.

Call me on the line Call me, call me any, anytime Call me, I'll arrive You can call me any day or night Call me

"Why didn't you show up then?" Jim wanted to ask Sam. Instead, Jim said he read that Simon and Garfunkel might reunite just for one concert.

Sam looked at Jim, for a moment seeming lost, then said matter-of-factly, "I don't do music anymore. I haven't heard news." Sam said he sold all his records at a huge discount. "Even your guitar?" Jim asked. Sam didn't answer.

The waiter arrived with their orders and Sam kept himself busy handing them their coffee. Amy put a tissue next to Sam's cup. She was the one who put sugar in his coffee.

The four of them. The silence in the middle of their spaces. Blondie had stopped. What else would they talk about? They all wanted to call for help from anyone, even the noisy old fan. They were like four actors in an old Hollywood movie, not knowing what roles to play so they pretended, unable to say the right lines.

Sam spoke, saying many things, trying to cover the silence. He said business was hard these times, especially in the province. The value of the peso against the dollar continued to drop. His voice trembled slightly.

Dale, in turn, told stories. The latest news from Hollywood. He said he and Jim were looking forward to *Fame*, and then *The Shining*, and especially *Elephant Man*. About someone who was supposedly a freak but the truth was, the people who couldn't accept him were the bigger freaks.

Occasionally, Jim caught Sam stealing glances at him. Suddenly he felt

the warmth of his breath on his ear again, whispering something to him, full of love. He quickly turned his gaze away.

"You, what's your work?" Sam looked at him, waiting for his answer.

"At UP," Jim replied. "I've been teaching for four years. It's okay."

"That's what you wanted to do back then, right?" Sam asked. "To teach?" Jim nodded.

Amy smiled at him, as if approving of his job.

Jim looked at Amy. Did she know about him and Sam before? Maybe not. Maybe yes. Jim glanced at Sam, who was wiping his mouth with a tissue. Jim waited to see Sam's old look for him break through his face.

But Sam looked down, as if wanting to avoid his eyes.

Jim looked at Dale. He knew that Dale knew what he was feeling now. Under the table, he held his hand.

Sam paid, despite Jim's insistence that they should. Not long after, Sam and Amy stood up. The pulled chair made a noise. Jim and Dale also stood up. Sam said goodbye. "Bye," he said. "Bye," Amy said. "Bye," said Jim and Dale, almost at the same time.

Then Sam and Amy left. As they walked away, Sam looked back. He smiled at Jim. Then he continued walking with Amy.

No words passed between Jim and Dale when they got home. They washed their faces in the bathroom at the same time. They brushed their teeth together. They changed into pajamas together.

Jim removed his hearing aid and cleaned it with a cotton swab. Then he put it back in its case. Then he went to bed.

"Should I turn off the light?" Dale asked. He didn't really need to ask because they always turned it off. Jim nodded, though he didn't hear the question. They lay down. And as their backs hit the bed at the same time, they both heard—like two guitars though it was only one—stronger and more intense because they heard it only within their beings, the music of Sam. As if calling for help, Jim turned to Dale. Dale embraced him with total love.

Chapter 5

NEW YEAR'S EVE 1983. SINCE THE AFTERNOON, Jim had been busy preparing food, with the help of a hired helper. Twelve round fruits, and then mechado, kare-kare, and lechon kawali.

Adding to the chaos: the light bulb in the living room was faulty, flickering, and seemingly about to burn out. Jim took a chair and while standing on it tried to fix the bulb. The pager went off. He took it from his pocket. Dale said he might be late, he couldn't leave his parents yet. "Happy New Year," the parents said.

The helper approached and said someone was looking for Jim. Jim was puzzled; they weren't expecting any visitors. He stepped down from the chair before the bulb was fixed. The helper asked if Jim still needed her.

"Go home now," Jim said, "your children are waiting for you."

Amy was at the door. Two years had passed since he last saw her, with Sam, but he couldn't forget her. She was in a pure white dress, her hair in a bun, carrying a white box.

Amy apologized for disturbing him, for coming without notice, especially on New Year, but she was delayed at the first place she went. She was Amy, by the way, if Jim still remembered.

Because she didn't speak much before, now her Chinese accent in a mix of Tagalog and English was more obvious to Jim. But she spoke Tagalog fluently.

"I know you," Jim said. Then he also apologized for the mess in the house, the flickering light bulb in the living room, and his disheveled appearance. Then he asked Amy if she wanted something to drink. "Water only, please," Amy said.

While getting water, Jim wondered why Amy was there—did something happen to Sam? He wished Dale would return.

When Jim returned to the living room with the water, Amy was already seated, looking down at the white box she brought, seemingly deep in thought. The broken light bulb cast flickering light on her face.

"Do you want us to transfer?" Jim said, pointing to the dining area where it was bright, while giving her the water. "No, it's alright," Amy said. "I won't stay long."

Amy drank the water for a moment. As she put the glass down, there was a loud explosion outside, so a slightly nervous laughter escaped her. Jim also laughed slightly, so Amy wouldn't be embarrassed.

"I got your address from the back of your and Sam's picture," Amy said. "I went there earlier but they said you don't live there anymore, your brother said. He gave me your address here."

Amy stopped, as if she suddenly lost the strength for what she was about to say. She just looked at Jim as if asking for help, while the dead-and-on light still played on her face. Jim waited.

Amy took something from her bag, a thin diary, and handed it to Jim, along with the white box. Her hand was trembling.

"Sam left a note," Amy said, forcing her voice to be steady. "He wanted you to have these."

Nervously, Jim took the diary and the box.

Then the light finally died. So they were both in the dark when Amy said softly, in a voice still forced to be steady, "Sam is dead. The other night." Jim tilted his head, unsure if he heard correctly. Something throbbed in his chest. "He took an overdose of sleeping pills," Amy continued, sounding like just a shadow in the dark. "In his note he also asked for forgiveness from me, from you... for not being strong enough."

The throb became a massive cut in Jim's chest; he couldn't breathe.

Amy was already standing, hurrying to leave. Was she crying? In the dark, Jim didn't know. But her voice was slightly trembling. "If—if you need anything, I put my address on top of the box."

Then she left. Jim was left in the dark, staring blankly while holding the diary and the box, which in his trembling he might drop—he might even fall to the floor first. What fell were his tears.

INSIDE THE ROOM, WHILE THE EXPLOSIONS OUTSIDE GREW LOUDER and more consecutive like machine guns, Jim watched the diary, almost unable to breathe. It was thin. "1982" was written on the front, along with the Chinese characters of Sam's name. Tan Sun Tiong.

Trembling, suppressing his tears from falling again, he began to open the pages. The diary was in Sam's handwriting.

JANUARY 9 It's only now that I'm writing a diary but I will try to do it. I feel the need now. Even just a few days of entries. I want to write everything. I want Jim to read this someday. I don't know what to write.

JANUARY 23 Amy is very kind, the perfect wife. Even though Papa didn't want to, Amy agreed to my wish for us to move here to Manila. Papa can run our hardware store in Iloilo anyway. I will open a small hardware store here in Manila.

FEBRUARY 12 Every now and then Papa visits. He pressures me and Amy saying we should have a child already. Eight years, why is there none yet? Our father in China didn't live to see it. He died already. I feel that I am unfair to Amy. It's impossible for us to have a child. Whenever I do it with her, I'm not... I can't. Amy never complains. I am grateful.

FEBRUARY 18 Amy and I visited the Chinese temple in Binondo. We lit incense to pray for a child. I thought of Jim. I wonder where he is now. Is he still mad at me?

FEBRUARY 20 Papa asked me to meet his friends. Papa visited Manila and they played mahjong with friends. He was bragging to his male friends that his first grandchild will be a boy. He never gives up, even after eight years. I just smiled. I am back into the closet again, pretending again to be what I am not.

MARCH 10 I dreamt of Jim.

MARCH 12 Amy and I made love again. I tried to make her happy. I hope she is happy.

MARCH 23 I don't play the guitar anymore. But in my mind I play it again, for Jim.

MARCH 30 Papa died yesterday. Until his death he was still hoping that I would give him a grandson.

APRIL 10 I thought of Jim again. I'm trying to dream of him but he doesn't appear even in my dreams. Maybe it's because he's still mad at me.

APRIL 14 It happened on this day, Good Friday, 8 years ago. I don't know if I want Jim to know about it. I don't want to cause him more pain. But I have to write it. To free myself of it. That day. Finally Jim and I would be together. But before I could take a cab, somebody grabbed me. They covered my mouth with a cloth with medicine. I lost consciousness. When I came to, I found myself blindfolded and gagged. My hands were also tied behind my back. But I knew I was

inside a van. I didn't know where we were. They kept me inside the van the whole day. Once they brought me water. There was a sedative in the water. Before I fell asleep, I thought of Jim. He must be waiting by the overpass near Q-Mart. When I woke up it was night. They finally removed my blindfold and gag. But my hands were still tied behind my back. Two soldiers were sitting in front of me. One had a large jaw. There was a large mole below his left nostril. He was angry. He was shouting at me. "Aren't you ashamed? You're gay! Stay away from Jim!" I tried to stand up. He punched me. He punched me many times. In the stomach. In the chest. Every time he punched me, he said, "goddammit!" He was shouting at me. "Don't ever show yourself to Jim again. If you show yourself to him again, I will harass your family. Your Chinese father, I will have him deported. He has no papers. Your sister, she's pretty, I can have her abducted like you." He pointed a gun at my head. "Do you understand me, huh, you Chinese?" He cocked the gun. I was terrified. The whole time I couldn't speak. They blindfolded and gagged me again. They dropped me in front of my studio apartment. Papa was terrified then. He said we couldn't report to the police. He immediately arranged for Amy and me to go to China the next morning. He said we would get married there right away. I wanted to go to Jim but I was afraid. Did I make the right decision? I don't know. At the airport when I saw Jim, I thought of turning my back on Amy and going to Jim. But I couldn't do it. I hope he can forgive me.

JUNE 3 Every now and then the thought comes to me, to ask Amy that we separate, since Papa and my father are gone. But I know Amy doesn't want to. It will bring shame to her and her family. It will be unfair to her.

JUNE 30 On this day two years ago, Amy and I accidentally met Jim. He has a boyfriend now. They seemed happy. I was happy for him. Although I also felt sad. I know, Amy knows everything. Even if we never talked about it. So that evening, I talked to her. I asked for her forgiveness. "I had no intention of deceiving you," I said. She didn't answer. She prepared our sleepwear and then turned off the light. "Let's sleep," she said. "You have many things to do tomorrow." But when we were already lying down, she turned to me and told me, in Hokkien: *Em si di e tse-kwa di pian ah-ni the*. "It's not your fault you're like that. You don't have to ask for forgiveness." I hugged her.

JULY 3 I heard Amy playing a record by Teresa Teng, a Taiwanese singer who is also famous in China and Hong Kong. I was curious and listened. *The Moon Represents My Heart. Goodbye My Love. Tian Mi Mi*. I liked her. There was sweetness and brokenness in her singing. Before long, we were both happily listening. Amy told me about Teresa Teng's life. At first her songs from Taiwan were banned in Mainland China, but because of her extreme popularity in China, some fans spent a month's rent just to buy pirated cassette tapes of Teresa Teng. Before long, her songs were also allowed there. We were happy that day. We had pansit and machang bought and ate our fill while listening to Teresa Teng's songs.

JULY 7 Our business is very strong, even though it just opened. It has never been this good. A customer made a mistake, I can't remember what, but Amy and I were laughing the whole day. Afterwards that night she brought out my guitar. It was like meeting an old friend when I held the guitar. I played for her. The first time I played for somebody else aside from Jim.

OCTOBER 20 We celebrated Amy's birthday. I'm glad she's happy. She was in white, her favorite color.

NOV 5 I miss Jim. The pain is intense. I want him here, beside me.

DEC 24 Everybody is busy preparing for the Noche Buena. *Ah tsi, ah koh, tua koh.* We have some relatives coming from Iloilo. Aside from Amy's family. Me, I am here in the room. I am alone.

DEC 26 This is my last entry. I will never write again.

WHILE JIM WAS CRYING, it felt like a blade was scraping his chest. Every bone, muscle, and tendon of his was crushed. He felt like he was dying over and over again.

It took a long time before he calmed down. He was still holding the diary.

He put the diary down and took the white box. Opened it. There were some trinkets for good luck there, bought by him and Sam in Ongpin before. The guitar pick he gave as a gift, which Sam apparently couldn't use. A Polaroid photo of him and Sam at the UP lagoon, already faded. Sam's arm was around him, they were both smiling so their slanted eyes disappeared. The old napkin, almost torn, where the Chinese characters of Sam's name were written, along with his full name, Jaime Marcelino.

His tears broke free and he finally wailed again. Dale, who had just arrived, approached. He saw the diary and the white box. The weeping Jim looked at him. "The light in the living room is broken," was all Jim could say. Dale immediately hugged him. Stroked his back. Jim still couldn't stop crying. "Sam is dead," he said, sobbing, to Dale.

That night, while the explosions outside continued, Dale wiped him with a towel soaked in hot water. On his head. On his neck. On his hands. On his legs. Dressed him in sleepwear. Assisted him to bed.

Jim almost fell, so Dale's jar of candies and chicklets was hit. Dale caught him.

Jim's tears were falling, even his mucus, while he said, "Sorry." "It's okay," Dale said, "it's okay." "Sorry," he said again, while crying, "sorry." Dale kissed Jim, tasting his tears and mucus. Jim held Dale's face, then kissed him too. Dale kissed Jim again. Kisses of comfort. Jim wasn't crying anymore. Dale continued to kiss him. Then Dale removed the sleepwear Jim had just put on. Jim removed Dale's clothes. They were both in just their briefs. They continued kissing. Jim hugged Dale, but what he felt was Sam's back. He was only slightly surprised. He looked at it. Sam smiled at him and his eyes disappeared. If the explosions outside were noisy earlier, now it was extremely silent. Jim caressed Sam's eyes, then pulled him and kissed him on the lips. Long and deep. Dale looked at Jim. He understood what Jim was doing. He held Jim's head then kissed the back of his neck while Jim continued kissing Sam. From behind, Dale inserted his hand into Jim's briefs. Jim moaned softly. He turned to Dale and Dale kissed him. Dale continued kissing Jim, while knowing Jim was hugging Sam. Jim caressed Sam's member while

Dale stroked Jim's member. They continued making love while all around was the music, the heard and the unheard.

Chapter 6

Luis watched Jim arrive in a furious rush. This was the brother who was the reason he had to work and couldn't become a soldier. The brother who was always the cause of his and Marina's conflicts before. A brother he could never understand—why couldn't he just follow what was right? After more than eight years of rarely showing up, Jim was now here, shouting accusations about an event that should have been forgotten long ago.

Luis and Marina were about to leave for church with their children, Sally, 7, and Eric, 5. Jim glanced at them for just a moment. He hardly recognized his own niece and nephew.

"You're a demon!" Jim screamed at Marina. "You and your brother are demons!"

The two children looked at Jim, clutching Luis in fear.

"What are you talking about?" Marina asked.

"You think you can get away with everything! You had your brother kidnap Sam so we wouldn't end up together!"

"That was so long ago," Marina said. "You're only exploding now?" She then motioned for Sally to take her brother inside the house. Sally kept looking back before finally entering with Eric.

Even from inside, Sally and Eric peeked through the window, watching what was happening. "Big sister, I'm scared," Eric said. "Don't be scared," Sally replied, leading her brother away from the window. "This is what you should do whenever you're afraid. Close your eyes and take a deep breath, like this." Eric closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "See? Is your fear gone now?" Sally asked.

Meanwhile, Luis told Jim, "I was the one who asked Oscar to find a way to stop you both."

Jim looked at Luis in shock. "How did he know?"

"We spoke to your roommate in the dorm," Luis said.

Jim remembered; he had left word with his roommate.

"We only did what had to be done," Luis said. "You were going to ruin your lives!"

JIM: "You have no right to interfere!"

MARINA: "No right? Aren't you ashamed? You're both gay!"

JIM: "It's better to be gay than to be a bad person!"

MARINA: "You should blame your boyfriend. He didn't fight for you."

JIM: "Because you threatened him!"

MARINA: "It's been years, what are you still complaining about? Aren't you happy with your new boyfriend? If you and Sam had ended up together, you wouldn't be where you are now!"

LUIS: "Jim..."

JIM (turning to Luis): "You're not my brother! I'm never coming back here!"

MARINA: "Then don't come back! Forget that it was Luis who raised you!"

JIM: "I wish he hadn't!"

MARINA: "Hey, if it weren't for Luis, you wouldn't have been able to study! Even your hearing aid back then, if not for my father..."

JIM: "I'll pay you back. Everything you spent, every cent, I'll return it!"

Jim then turned his back and left for good. And he never showed himself to them again. But he made good on his word. From then on, every first week of the month, Marina and Luis would receive a money order from Jim—a money order that Luis would stare at for a long time, while remembering their happy days as Jim grew up.

He remembered constantly telling Jim not to be afraid while they were on the Ferris wheel, their games of *tumbang preso* and *patintero* on the street under the full moon, and how he always told Jim before they slept that he would become a soldier. He remembered how Jim would look up at him in awe, and the instructions from their parents, Pancho and Lita, to always take care of Jim. Was everything really going to end here, for this small amount of money? Sometimes, he just couldn't understand life.

Chapter 7

Sally was often teased at school because her clothes were always oversized—people said they could be used as blankets, tents, or even graduation gowns. Sally didn't care; she did what she wanted. At the department store, she insisted her parents buy her loose dresses instead of pants, even if it made her look older or discouraged suitors.

Marina was frustrated, especially since Luis always indulged Sally. Sally was thin and beautiful, unlike her fourteen-year-old brother, Eric, who was often teased for being chubby. Marina would often scold Eric, wondering who he took after since everyone else in the family was thin. Sally and Luis would defend him, which only made Marina more irritable.

What Marina didn't know was that there were actually three women in that house. When everyone was asleep, Sally would let Eric wear her loose dresses. In private, Sally called him

"Erich." Eric believed he wasn't a boy; he felt he was a woman like Sally and their mother, just born in the wrong body.

Eric envied Sally's body and hoped to look like her one day. He hated his own body and the way his classmates laughed at him. Sally told him they were just afraid of what they didn't understand. But even Sally struggled to understand why this was happening. She only knew it was "forbidden," much like the name of their Uncle Jim, which was never mentioned in the house except when his monthly money orders arrived.

One night, while Luis and Marina were out, Sally dressed Eric in a flowery dress with large sleeves. Eric was overjoyed. She did his makeup and let him wear her high heels. He strutted back and forth like a model until he finally worked up the courage to walk out of their room and into the living room.

Suddenly, Luis and Marina arrived. Marina was furious. "Why are you wearing your sister's dress?" she demanded. Luis wondered if this was a curse or "bad blood" in the family. When Marina asked if he was gay, Sally stepped in and said, "No. She is a woman."

Marina snatched the dress, nearly knocking Eric over. Luis shouted that he was worse than Uncle Jim. Eric, trembling, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Luis tried to rip the dress off him, but Eric held on tight. Eventually, Luis took off his belt and whipped Eric repeatedly. Sally screamed for him to stop, but Luis wouldn't listen.

Luis locked a struggling Eric in the room, vowing he wouldn't come out until he changed. They left food outside, but Eric didn't touch it. Sally prayed for him. Later, Luis and Marina questioned where they had gone wrong.

On the second day of his "imprisonment," Eric came out still wearing the dress. "I am Erich," he said. Sally felt proud, but Luis remained hardened. When Eric tried to say he loved them, Luis wouldn't hear it. Marina dragged Sally away and locked her in their room, telling her to pray. When they finally let Sally out, Eric was gone.

Years passed. Sally worked as a waitress and studied accounting. She sold items to classmates to save money, hoping to one day find and save Erich. Eventually, she saw a cooking show featuring a "Chef Lari" and a companion who made gender-themed cakes. The companion was inspired by a story of someone named "Erich" who had been kicked out by their parents. Sally realized it was her brother.

Sally contacted Chef Lari and his wife, Ma'am Amor. They told her how they had found Eric—thin, malnourished, and terrified on the streets. They had taken him in and given him a job and a place to stay. They treated him with the love and acceptance his own parents never gave. They even bought him dresses and makeup, calling him "Erich."

Erich had flourished there, showing talents for singing and dancing. He had even tried to return home once, fully dressed as a woman, but Marina had coldly told him never to show his face there again.

Chef Lari then told Sally about "the accident." One night, a former friend of Erich's from the streets, Teroy, broke into the cakeshop to rob it. Erich tried to talk him down, telling Teroy he understood his pain. But when Ma'am Amor entered the room, a panicked Teroy pointed his gun at her. Erich jumped in front of her and took the bullet in his chest.

Erich died with a smile of love and gratitude for the people who had truly accepted him. Sally wept at Erich's grave, which was marked "Erich Marcelino," using the name he chose and his true surname. She begged for forgiveness for all the things she hadn't been able to do for him.

Chapter 8

After Erich's death, Sally does not reveal what happened to Luis and Marina. She locks herself in her room for days, crying and refusing to go to school or work. Luis is worried but unable to do anything.

One day, Sally cuts her hair very short and begins wearing the oversized clothes she used to dress Erich in. She begins to eat excessively, consuming massive amounts of food like *lechon kawali*, *bagnet*, and *dinuguan*. Marina tries to hide the food, but Sally finds it anyway, even eating scraps from the trash. Marina threatens to kick her out if she keeps getting fat, but Sally fights back, and their relationship becomes a constant war.

As Sally turns 23, she begins working as an assistant clerk and starts dating women. She deliberately kisses her dates in front of their house to shock Marina. Marina is horrified, screaming that Sally is a "tomboy" (lesbian) and demanding that Luis intervene, but Luis remains silent, having seemingly erased Erich from his memory.

Sally eventually moves a woman named Talia into the house. They spend all their time together in Sally's room. One morning, Marina catches them together and attacks Talia, calling her a "puta" (whore). During the chaos, Talia runs out into the street and is tragically struck and killed by a truck. Sally hugs Talia's bloody body and screams at her mother, threatening to expose all their family's secrets.

Following this tragedy, Sally leaves home for good. Before she goes, she finally tells her parents the truth: Erich is dead, and he died surrounded by people who were not his blood but who loved him more than they ever did.

Sally rents a small room in Sampaloc. For two years, Luis and Marina visit her, begging her to come home, but she refuses to see them. Luis often waits by her door, especially on her birthday, March 24, hoping for a letter or a sign. Marina even cooks Sally's favorite *mechado*, but Sally never returns.

Sally continues to date various people. She experiments with her identity, sometimes wearing tight polos and pants, other times wearing loose dresses. She explores her sexuality and gender, eventually identifying as non-binary and fluid. She becomes open to all kinds of people—trans men, asexuals, and others—finding love in the "folds of her oversized clothes."

Eventually, Sally discovers she is pregnant. Her first instinct is fear, and she tries to induce an abortion using herbs from Quiapo and by physically hitting her stomach, but the pregnancy persists. She loses her job and is eventually evicted from her room for failing to pay rent.

Cold, wet from the rain, and heavily pregnant, Sally wanders the streets with nowhere to go. She looks at a small scrap of paper with an address: **No. 40 Leon Guinto St.** She knocks on the door, trembling. A man in pajamas answers. Through her fading vision, she recognizes him as her **Uncle Jim**. Beside him stands another man, also in pajamas.

"I am Sally," she says to Jim. "I am your niece. I am pregnant."

Then, she loses consciousness.