

## Chapter 9

Jim gazed in wonder at the pregnant woman now resting on the sofa as he and Dale waited for her to wake up. He was aware that Luis and Marina had two children, having seen them as toddlers, but he lacked any further details about the family they had left behind.

A decade had slipped by since the thought of making peace with Luis and Marina first crossed his mind. Dale frequently reminded him that regardless of what had transpired, they were still family, so Jim simply waited for the right moment.

Then one evening, Egay showed up. He was a former teaching colleague who had joined a militant group and was operating underground. Egay was also gay—very openly so. This took place during the presidency of Fidel Ramos. Jim routinely provided Egay with money, clothing, and food to distribute to his comrades. They often talked about how the state's crackdown on citizens in the 1970s, regardless of sexual orientation, mirrored the oppression of the present day.

Later, after they had finished their meal, Egay spoke up. "Jim, we've been friends since our UP days, so I can be blunt with you, can't I?" "What is it?" "Are you still in touch with your brother, Luis?" "Why do you ask?" Egay paused before answering, "My group has reliable information—your brother is an informant."

The news stunned both Jim and Dale. They were told the military was paying Luis to spy on workers organizing unions in the factories where he was employed. He was doing the same in their local neighborhood, leading to many arrests and imprisonments. He was essentially making money off the lives of his own people.

Jim was in total disbelief. "I'm sorry," Egay added, "but it's something you had to hear."

Days later, Luis came to Jim and Dale's apartment, hoping to settle their differences. Jim confronted him with fury. "I don't have a brother who serves as an informant," Jim declared. "Your hands are stained with the blood of our fellow citizens." He ordered Luis to leave, and that was the final time they ever saw one another.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you, I'm so sorry, I had nowhere else to go," Sally said when she regained consciousness. They handed her a towel and gave her hot tea to drink. "It's good you came here," Jim said. He still couldn't believe he was facing Sally. "How did you find our address?"

She said that back then, she always saw her parents arguing over whether to accept the money Jim sent. She became curious. One afternoon, she copied Jim's address from a money order and went looking for him.

"You saw me?" "I saw you, and him too; you went out together once, arms around each other, you looked so happy, probably headed somewhere."

She looked at Jim and Dale then, unsure if what she felt was envy, joy, or a sense of longing. She had turned and left just as they were approaching.

"You can stay here for now," Dale told Sally, "we have a spare room." Sally looked at Jim, as if seeking his permission as well. Jim nodded. "If you need anything else, just tell us." "Can I call you Uncle?"

Jim nodded. Sally hugged him. Surprised at first, Jim hugged her back. Sally's grip tightened, and Jim felt her tears soaking into his shoulder.

With every contraction Sally felt, Jim and Dale were on standby, panicking at every false alarm, thinking her water had broken. They raced to be near her until, before long, the baby arrived—a boy. Sally just stared at the baby, as if still in disbelief. The nurse placed the baby on her chest. It was a long time before she finally held him. It was Jim who suggested the name Joshua, which he said meant salvation.

They became like a complete family: Sally, Jim, Dale, and Joshua. Jim and Dale would race each other home from work, competing with Sally to take care of Joshua. They didn't really need to compete, though, because Sally was still hesitant to hold the baby, as if she wasn't used to it. Often, she would just sleep in her room, so Jim and Dale took turns at night deciding who would wake up to change diapers and clean Joshua. Sally almost didn't want to breastfeed the child—"What is your problem, Sally? That's your baby!"—so Jim and Dale were the ones rushing to prepare formula.

They waited for his first words. "Grandpa," Jim said. "No," Dale said, "I heard 'Mama'." Sally just looked at the child, her face devoid of emotion. Sally remembered being three years old, calling "Mommy" and stroking the long hair of her mother, Marina, who was pretending to sleep because she didn't want to deal with her child. Jim remembered crying "Mama, Papa" at the bodies of his parents, Pancho and Lita, trying to wake them up. They danced to the music of Simon and Garfunkel and other singers—Sally hugged by Dale, and Joshua carried by Jim.

On nights when Joshua was asleep, Jim and Dale would tell Sally stories about their time in the '80s and '90s, the flourishing of music and film then—Madonna, Michael Jackson, Regine Velasquez, Basil Valdez, the Eraserheads, Color It Red, Afterimage, and more; movies like Tootsie, Back to the Future, Thelma & Louise, My Own Private Idaho, and Titanic. But most of all, the era of Betamax tapes.

Even the stingy Dale started collecting Betamax tapes of old movies, not just Hollywood films but Tagalog movies as well. Jim mentioned a title that Dale immediately went out to buy—Rebel Without a Cause. They watched it right away that night, and afterwards, Jim shared that it was that movie that sparked his sexual awakening.

They watched almost every night, exchanging famous movie quotes. "You're nothing but a second-rate trying-hard copy cat!" "There are no miracles!" "You think there's nothing, but there is, there is, there is!" "No wire hangers ever!" "E.T. phone home!" "I'm the king of the world!"

Once, they went to a music and video store at Megamall. Dale was thrilled because he found a Betamax copy of "I am Emma, Woman!", a film about a transsexual person who, after undergoing sexual reassignment surgery, takes revenge on those who looked down on her. Jim was surprised that records were no longer being sold. CDs filled almost all the shelves. Dale asked if he wanted to buy some Simon and Garfunkel CDs. Jim felt a sense of weakness holding the CDs. Everything had shrunk!

Those were also the times, Jim and Dale continued telling Sally and Joshua, when Rock Hudson came out and admitted he had AIDS and was near death. Rumors spread that he'd had a relationship, however brief, with a Filipino flight steward. It caused widespread fear; people were repulsed and stayed away from gay men, as if they were contagious. Jim and Dale weren't afraid, but they avoided going out as much.

As Joshua grew, he became more mischievous, loving to climb fences; whenever he got hurt, Jim and Dale would race to blow on the wound. Both wanted to be fathers. Joshua would fiddle with everything—once he even put on Jim's hearing aid and nearly got it wet with his milk. When he couldn't sleep and needed his favorite children's books read to him, Jim and Dale would race again. "Which of us do you want to read to you, Joshua?" Dale asked. Joshua pointed at Jim. Jim laughed and teased Dale, "I'm our baby's favorite!"

Jim and Sally wanted Joshua to experience everything they never did. They were trying to reclaim their past through him. Joshua could wear any clothes—no "boy" or "girl" colors, even if they had ribbons. He could have any toy, whether a doll or a bicycle. There was nothing wrong if he acted "soft." They didn't want to call him "son," just "child"—gender-neutral.

Jim and Dale told Sally and Joshua about how they joined the very first LGBT Pride March in the Philippines at the Quezon Memorial Circle on June 26, 1994, commemorating the Stonewall Uprising. In the Philippines, there were only about thirty of them marching then. Danton Remoto and Murphy Red were there, along with members of Gabriela, farmers, and a transwoman named Bongga who had worked in Japan. They protested not just discrimination, but also anti-people state policies like VAT and rising oil prices. "Being Open Is Free," one placard said. "We love people with HIV/AIDS," said another.

Unite, their manifesto said: fight homophobia, crush the patriarchy, and advance our rights even if it costs our lives. Sally thought to herself: that was also the year Erich died. She felt a chill. But the most important march for them remained the marches in June, during Pride Month. Someday, they said, when Joshua is grown, he will march during Pride Month too.

Chapter 10

In recent days, Jim started having dreams where Sam appeared to him, smiling, but now truly without eyes, just round, dark hollows. Dale would wake up in the middle of the night and hear Jim calling out to Sam. They both knew, like a ghost that never truly left, Sam was there.

Jim dreamt of Sam twice more before thinking perhaps Sam was coming for him. From then on, in his final days, he was constantly thinking about death, like a visitor knocking on his consciousness whom he couldn't refuse entry, even while playing with Joshua.

So many had died. His nephew Erich, according to Sally, was killed defending others. Talia, Sally's girlfriend, was run over because of Marina. Sam had taken his own life. Oscar was found with his face and neck slashed and his genitals cut off.

A former co-worker of Dale's with AIDS died a week after they visited him in the hospital, while they played his favorite song, "True Colors" by Cyndi Lauper. Egay was killed by the military in 2005, just a week after he and his partner Remus were married. Egay had stayed behind so his comrades could escape an ambush, and the military later desecrated his body in the plaza to mock his courage.

How could one say a person's life was complete? Jim thought of many things he wished he had done: being more involved in the movement, keeping his family with Luis whole, and fighting more for his love for Sam. Lately, Jim rarely wore his hearing aid; he was hearing what he needed to hear.

He often remembered his parents, Pancho and Lita, and the accident that changed his life forever. They say when you are close to death, your life comes back around like a circle. He and Dale went to the UP lagoon one night, where the twin acacia trees still stood. They ate machang in Ongpin at the same place he and Sam once ate, while outside, people watched a dragon dance.

They went back to the music store at Megamall, where Jim felt weak seeing only CDs and no records. At home, Jim gazed at his record collection—old friends that never left. He put a record on the turntable and let the music pull him back to the past. Dale watched him from the bathroom door, knowing he couldn't enter Jim's world at that moment. When they finally lay down, Jim stroked Dale's face and said, "Thank you".

Jim was the first to wake up the next morning. He looked at his hearing aid one last time before putting it back in its case. Inside the bathroom, he didn't hear his own collapse. Dale found him on the floor, hands folded over his heart, no longer breathing.

Luis was watering plants when Sally, Dale, and three-year-old Joshua arrived at the gate. "Uncle Jim is gone," Sally said. Luis sobbed as he embraced his grandson and daughter. At the morgue, Dale told Luis that Jim had died of heart failure. Dale then proposed burying Jim and Sam together.

Amy, Sam's wife, agreed to the plan. She had always known why Sam wanted to move to Manila and, after thirty years, she felt it was time to make things right. On a rainy day, they

buried Jim and transferred Sam's remains next to him. The headstones read Jaime Marcelino and Samuel Tan.

Luis invited Sally and Joshua to live with him. Dale was moving to Davao with his parents. That night, Luis sat in his room and looked at a butterfly hair clip Marina had left behind before he told her he was leaving her.

At Dale's apartment, he packed boxes for Sally containing Jim's old hearing aids, clothes, and record collection. He looked at the large empty jar they used for candy and smiled, hearing Jim call him his "bodegero". He did not regret giving his life to Jim; he loved. The next morning, he delivered the boxes and a check for Joshua's schooling before saying his final goodbyes.