



WMS
Verde
Fundador
Exclusivo
Aguardiente



Sideways *by VeryWellAged*

A Novel

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Preface

On language and culture.

This story, as do many of my stories, involves an American English speaker living in the Philippines and interacting with Filipinos. Primarily with Filipinas, the females.

For those of you whose primary language is English, it may surprise you that compared to some other languages, your language is a highly precise stew pot of words, nuances, and structures that allow for a strict understanding of exactly what is intended to be conveyed. We have rules upon rules of what constitutes correct speech so that ambiguity is removed.

The languages of the Philippines are the converse. Ambiguity is part and parcel of their lives. States of being we use are completely missing from their casual lexicon. Where a child might come to an adult and say, 'Mom says to tell you it is time to eat dinner.' A Tagalog speaker might simply say *Kain na*. That Tagalog translates to *Eat now*. If you hand me a sack of potato chips, I might say, *I have had enough*, in Tagalog, it would be *Tama na*. Now, *Tama* actually means *Correct* and *na* means *now*. But when strung together it is understood as *Enough*. So *Correct now*, means *Enough*, and nowhere is there a verb of being.

The result is a spoken English which sounds a bit odd to your ears until you remember that the missing words come from people who are unaccustomed to using anything like them. An example is: *What you do her?* Which can mean: *What did you do to her?* Or *What did you do with her?* Or *What did you do for her?* You are supposed to gather the meaning based on the context of when the question was asked.

An additional complexity arises in our penchant for asking compound or complex questions. For instance, in the sentence:

Joan, are you ready to agree; is this for you?

The Filipina hears two questions.

1. Are you ready to agree?
2. Is this for you?

When faced with two questions in one sentence, you will not get a useful answer. If you do, you are very lucky! The general rule is one question per

sentence. However you can modify a sentence, by asking it in improper English and avoid this. It is a subtle difference but it does work.

Joan are you ready to agree, this not for you?

It may not seem like much to you and it is definitely not proper English, but you will get your answer!

In this novel, the dialog is as accurate to the place and type of conversation as I can make it. There are things I don't do. In real dialog, he is confused with she and visa versa. Tagalog does not use gender pronouns and so the Tagalog speaker will often make this mistake.

Pronouns are used freely within sentences and often do not refer to any identified subject. Further a number of individuals may be identified by the same pronoun in the same sentence. If there are four sisters, which sister is being referenced, is anyone's guess. If you ask, you often get a look, like, why does it matter?

That is the nature of the ambiguousness in lives led. You will often hear a Filipino complain that a foreigner is strict. The foreigner is trying to untangle the ambiguity and it is not appreciated.

So I have done as much as I can without making the reading completely impossible. I hope you enjoy what follows.

Say it ain't so

This hasn't gone like it was supposed to go. I met a really pretty, and pretty young, Filipina on-line, by the name of Charline. I was thirty-two years older than was she, but she seemed OK with it. I brought her to the USA and married her.

And there we lived, for five wonderful years. Charline got her ten year green card and then her US citizenship.

I was happy, truly happy. So was she, though she missed the Philippines and bugged me to help her purchase property there. Eventually, she convinced me that I should retire there. And so, in year six, I retired and we moved lock, stock, and barrel, to the municipality of Naval¹, on the island and province of Biliran, in the Philippines.

Naval's not a tourist stop for foreigners, but it is where Charline's family is from, and so it is where we settled. It is where we built a house on a lot I purchased for us. Her name was listed as owner, but my name was listed as husband on the deed. That made it ours, but as I cannot even own more than fifty percent as an inheritance, it was never going to be fully mine. It was hers. The house we built was also in her name. It was something I never even noticed until the electric company listed the house as hers and hers alone.

Still, I thought all was good, and it seemed to be for the three years it took to build the house and then finish all the small things as we settled in. Over the three years, the house would be filled with her family on the weekends. There was laughter and clear happiness.

Before I even moved permanently to Naval, I got my permanent 13A visa as a permanent immigrant via the Philippine Consulate. Once we got here, Medicare was no longer an option. Instead, I was a dependent on Charline's PhilHealth, which is much like

¹ Pronounced: nah-VAHL.

Medicare in the States. I got a Senior Citizen's card and booklet which allowed for reduced prices on meals, groceries, and medicines.

I guess getting the card was a little illegal as I am not a citizen. But it helped a great deal and I was happy to have it.

We settled in.

And then one morning Charline got out of bed and announced she was going back to the States. A friend of hers there had a job waiting for her. She would live with her friend.

She made it pretty clear that she was leaving me.

Why?

I got no answer. For the next few days, as she packed and got things collected for her trip, I got no answers. Her family said nothing to me. For the most part, they didn't even come around.

Where do you expect me to live?

Here.

How?

What you mean how? This is our house. You live here. You say you like it, so stay here.

What do I do when I need to renew my 13A at the end of the 5 years?

I will help you. Not a problem. Or maybe you will file for a Retirement Visa then. Then you not need me for the Visa.

How do I continue with PhilHealth? I am on it based on you.

My sister have my papers. She carry the papers for the PhilHealth office. No problem.

Three days after her announcement, she was gone. If not legally separated, I was separated in reality. I might not own the land or the house, but I could live in it. When I died, it would be hers anyway.

But I was not completely alone, or I thought not. We had a maid and she could do the shopping and the cleaning. I had no designs on the woman. She was married to a nice guy and lived just down the road.

The day after Charline left, the maid quit.

I don't speak Cebuano (also called Bisaya) or Waray-Waray, the two 'dialects' spoken on the island. Folks here have some English, but I was essentially fucked. I had sold everything back in Ogallala, Nebraska. There was nothing, and no one, to go back to. My income was OK but limited. There was plenty enough to live here, but it wasn't so much by standards in the States. If I had not sold everything, maybe I could have gotten by OK back there, but I had closed that door when I moved to Naval.

So, here I am, alone in the house. Not a potato in the kitchen and I don't even know how to use the rice cooker to make the rice. I have some Filipino hotdogs in the freezer.

I walk down to a sari-sari store and buy a loaf of "white bread." Their bread is sweet and the size of each slice in the loaf is small. The small Filipino hotdog sticks out of the ends of the bread as I wrap the dog with a slice.

This is a massive cluster fuck.

I eat three dogs and bread along with some San Miguel beer for my beverage. So OK, I am full for now. But what am I going to do going forward? It's a real problem.

I have Internet and open up Facebook. A guy I know in the States, who is married to a Filipina, is on-line. I send him a short message. He answers, asking, 'what's up?'

I pour it all out in that chat session. He asks for a 'time out' for a few minutes. When he gets back on he has news for me and apologizes for having to tell me what he has yet to say. And then he lays it all out. It is the sort of thing I was thinking but didn't want to believe.

His wife is aware that Charline has left me. But it was not for a job, though Charline will get one. She got what she needed from me: land in the Philippines; a fully built house; and US citizenship. That completed, and knowing there is no more banked wealth she can tap, as far as Charline is concerned, I am disposable. And so, she has returned to the USA, knowing I really can't and won't follow her. She is done with me.

My buddy is sorry for me, and maybe, just maybe, a little scared for himself, though his wife tells him, not to worry. But promises like that sure aren't helping him as we continue to chat.

I am sitting here without a clue of what the fuck to do even to fill the time. TV isn't even an option. We have a TV, but the channels are all Filipino. I didn't splurge on cable. I guess I can now, but that will take a bit. I mess around on the computer for a bit, lock up the house, and go to bed at 8:30PM.

Breakfast is doable. I can make coffee and there are some bananas in the house. There is also a box of Nestle Corn Flakes. I really didn't know Nestle made corn flakes. I thought it was a Kellogg's product, but sure as hell, this box says Nestle.

I dump some flakes into a bowl, put some sugar on the flakes, slice a banana over that, and add some "lite" milk.

OK that is accomplished... but what the fuck do I do now?

I grab a length of mahogany from a branch of a tree we cut down on the property that was in the way of a shed I wanted to build. Taking out my knife from my pocket, I take a seat on the terrace out front and start whittling. Maybe I can make a walking stick from this.

I am taking my time. It seems to me, time is something I have plenty of and there ain't a soul waiting for me. So maybe I just need to do some thinking before I get all riled up and bothered.

Right now I am just getting the basic shape set. I haven't done any fine work and I have left the top of the stick alone. I like the grain of the wood and am still working it when I realize it is past time for

a lunch meal. I figure that keeping to a 'normal' schedule will be good for my mental health as I work through this mess. But I ain't really got any food for lunch made.

Putting the mahogany down and the knife back in my pocket, I close up the house and walk down the road. There is a bakery about a half a kilometer away. I will buy something there.

This is a town, but it is pretty rural as towns go. Every one of my neighbors is somehow related to every one of the rest of my neighbors. Or at least it seems that way to me.

I can't be sure, but it seems to me that people are noticing me as I walk by their homes. Maybe I am just imagining it. Don't know. It just feels weird. I feel very isolated and vulnerable.

It's sunny and hot out. I don't use an umbrella. I do have a broad brimmed straw hat which helps a bit, but the perspiration is soaking my shirt and rolling down my back. The dust from the dirt road is mixing with the sweat. I feel far less than clean. My Adidas' are comfortable and the walking itself is not a problem. But though half a 'k' is not far, I am regretting not taking the car.

Yeh, the car is in her name too. Yes she left it and it is mine to drive, but not to own and not to sell if I want to sell it before buying something else.

I see the bakery. One of the gals there has a rig set up out front and she is frying doughnuts. In a stall two down from her, a man is selling pork BBQ. These are little chunks of marinated pork, on bamboo skewers. I buy six skewers of the BBQ and half a dozen of the doughnuts, before reversing course and returning home. On the way I eat the pork, skewer by skewer, tossing the little bamboo sticks to the side as I finish each.

By the time I return home, the pork is gone and I have consumed one of the doughnuts. Putting the rest of the baked goods on the kitchen table, I strip down, pulling the wet and sticky shirt, shorts, and briefs off me. The shower feels good. Though I can take a hot shower, I keep the temp very cool.

Dry, redressed, and back in the kitchen I grab one more of the doughnuts before returning to my project.

The wood is talking to me as my knife meets the grain and works its way. It will be a strong walking stick. The ninety degree bend on the top will make a good hand grip as the grain bends that way. There is no knot involved.

In the past I normally whittled on maple rifle stock blanks. I have no firearms here. But the walking stick will prove a modicum of protection so long as the other guy doesn't pull a gun.

Do I need protection? I hadn't thought so up to now. But I no longer feel safe. Is that silly? I mean my wife was not exactly a bodyguard. But in a way she was. I am exposed now in a way I was not before.

I am taking my time with my new walking stick. I remove bits slowly, I grab some sandpaper from the shed and remove a great deal of extraneous material, before tackling the handgrip with my knife.

It is beginning to come to life, but the sun is fading. I put the stick down. Locking up the house again, I drive to a well-known resto-bar here, Jelo's Place. There I can get a decent plate of rotisserie chicken, fried rice, good burgers, or some good pancit. There are nice desserts, if I wanted that, which I do not at present. And there is beer. If it ain't high cuisine, it ain't bad either. The food is tasty and I didn't have to cook it. As I haven't gone shopping, I really don't have anything to cook anyway. Besides I don't have a clue how to cook fried rice or chopsuey².

Charline and I used to eat here on occasion and the guy serving me asks, *Where your wife, Sir?*

I suspect she is still traveling, but I sure as hell don't really know. I tell him, *In the USA.*

She there visiting without you?

² It may be "Chop Suey" in the rest of the world, but in the Philippines it is one word.

No, she is there is stay.

When you leave?

I am not leaving.

Why you not with your wife?

Ask her! OK, so that was uncalled for, but I guess it just came out all on its own.

*Anyway, it freaks the guy out and he just about runs away after saying, *Sorry, sorry! I sorry, Sir!**

I wave to him to come back and apologize for being rude.

No Sir, you not rude! Your wife. It is she who is rude. She not to do that. It is wrong. You want her back, Sir?

Yeh, I thought I did. But if this is what she really is, then maybe I am better without her.

Sir? Yes, I think maybe you correct! If she bad to you, then better you know it! Yes, you are correct. Better she be gone. Sir, maybe you want another beer? Or maybe you want some Fundador?

OK, some of the brandy, Fundador Light³, but no ice.

Yes, Sir!

I suspect I downed about half a litre before returning home at 9PM.

Morning arrives without any type of a plan. I am as lost as I was yesterday. All I can do is make another bowl of corn flakes and brew another pot of coffee.

Normally the maid took care of the laundry every second day. But there is no maid here. The floors are getting gritty and the laundry

³ A basic brandy. Cost is far more than basic Tanduay Light Rhum and is considered a treat to be served after dinner to guests. For comparison, the cost of 750ml of the rhum will be less than seventy-five pesos, while the cost of the brandy in the 750ml size is over three hundred pesos. The difference does not go unnoticed to those who are offered it.

is piling up. I am not sure about how to get a maid, but there is a laundry down the road, between the bakery and the resto-bar.

I put all my laundry, and the sheets I had been sleeping on, in a basket and drive it down to the “Cool Bubbles” laundry. As I am already half way to the supermarket, I continue down the road and do some very necessary shopping for foods I am able to cook.

Potatoes are not nearly as inexpensive as is rice, but I know what to do with spuds. I buy eggs, bacon, ham, more hotdogs, some frozen fish called ‘cream dory⁴,’ some flour, butter, vegetables, and fruit. Also in the cart is another loaf of bread, ten San Miguel beers, two 750ml bottles of Tanduay Light Rhum, ten cans of Spam, some spaghetti noodles, Del Monte spaghetti sauce, and a dozen bags of potato chips.

Yes maybe, if I was Filipino, I could have gotten the vegetables and fruit at a better price at the open air market, which is called a palengke, but with my white skin, Charline always told me, if I showed up, the prices would be sky high.

Before I drive home, I stop at a Minute Burger and buy three burgers. I get six, as it is two for the price of one, for these little sliders. Three are finished off before I get back home. The next three go down with the help of a beer.

After putting the groceries away, I return to the terrace and my walking stick. I continue sanding with a fine grit paper. I will checker the shaft in places and make finger guides on the handle, but first I want to bring the entire piece down to a fine sanded result. Eventually, there will not be a spot on the entire piece that is not smooth to the touch.

As I sand, I think about what fate has dealt me. There are moments I am incredibly sad and feeling sorry for myself. There are moments when I want to believe this is all a big misunderstanding and that she will come back. There are moments I just can’t believe that it

⁴ The cream dory, also referred to as Pangasius or Pacific dory, is a farm-bred fish, white in color and soft in texture.

has happened. And there are moments when I am angry with a red hot rage. The one thing I am not, is feeling guilty. I do not deserve this. I did nothing wrong. I am one of the good guys. Even she, knew it, and said so on occasion.

Is this the 'nice guys finish last' reality?

Is this my reward for being decent and caring?

I have sanded off all the grit from the paper, I have been sanding so long and hard. Now it needs oil to bring the luster forth, but before that I need to carve more. Maybe tomorrow. I am done for today.

I get up, dust myself off, put some ice in a tumbler and pour a fair amount of rum over it. This rum is a little sweet. The sugar cane that produced it lives on in the flavor. I open a bag of chips and proceed to make a good dent on the rum, while finishing off the bag of chips. I am not hungry and I will skip supper.

It is dark out. I clean up the mess I left on the terrace and start my computer. Let's see what Charline has posted on her Facebook page.

I'll be damned! The bitch has blocked me on Facebook.

I decide to return the favor and block her. Fuck her.

I search for her Facebook friends, but each of them has blocked me too.

I search for her sister's page. That very sister who it supposed to help me with the issue of PhilHealth, but I am blocked there too. This is a fucking nightmare. How many people were in on this?

I am getting more and more pissed off. Do I have any real friends? Why didn't anyone warn me?

I decide to check out some porn on the net before crashing for the night. The porn is OK, but it doesn't get me horny. It just makes me feel lonely. It is not what I need. Are the girls pretty? Sure some are, but so what? They aren't mine.

I wander around the house. It is not a small place. We built it with the understanding that it would often overflow with her extended family. And it did until a couple of days ago. Now it is as quiet and as empty as a mausoleum.

In the two days since she has left, it is already showing signs that it needs to be cleaned. Life has left the house. Joy has abandoned the premises. There is a sense of an impending denouement. A final curtain to be drawn and a sense that I am in the way, an obstacle interrupting the natural order of things.

I don't belong here. I know it. All around me know it. The universe knows it. And yet here I am, stuck and not moving at all. What did she think I would do? Did she give it any thought at all? Did it even cross her mind?

Knock-knock

Morning finds me with a hangover headache. Damn, I drank far too much rum without a foundation in my stomach. I know better. My stomach is not cooperating either. I am burping noxious fumes. I decide the best medicine right now is bread. I take four slices out of the bag containing the loaf, and just eat them without ceremony.

That does the trick and the belching stops. I brew some coffee and take it black with a little sugar. Between cups of the brew, I grab two aspirin and swallow them with a sip of coffee from the second mug's worth.

An hour later, the headache is subsiding a bit and my stomach, if not in tiptop condition, is not at war with me. I check Facebook again. This time I see if the friends I had and my family have also blocked me. They haven't. My friends are still my friends. It's just that all the folks I knew after Charline and I got together have blocked me. I now proceed to block each and every one of them.

It's not that I am going to post anything right now. It's just that my business is no concern of hers anymore and as these folks have chosen sides, they don't need to see it either.

This morning my hands were shaking too much to do any carving on the walking stick, but they have settled down now. I go back out to the terrace and start by using a pencil and drawing a serpent wrapping around the stick from bottom with the handle being the mouth. If I make an error with the pencil, no harm is done. I am drawing for a couple of hours when a voice from outside the gate calls, *Ay-0000! Ay-0000!*⁵

I put the stick down and walk to the gate. On the other side are two women. One clearly older than the other.

⁵ Sounds like *I-ob, I-ob*. The "ay" is hard "I."

Maayong buntag⁶, Sir.

Good morning Madam. Wala⁷ Cebuano.

OK, oo⁸, we try English. You need maid?

Yes. Why do you ask?

Your wife leave you? We hear this.

I see. Are you a maid?

Me? Dil⁹. My daughter. This one. She a good girl. She be your maid maybe?

How old is she?

Sixteen, Sir.

Then no.

Why, Sir? She is a hard worker.

She is too young to be in my home alone with me. You or someone else could call the police. Say I do wrong.

No, Sir! It OK. No problem.

No. She is too young.

Wait, we be back. I show you it OK.

Madam, I am sure your daughter is a good girl. But she is just too young.

Yes, yes... We be back!

They leave and I return to my drawing of a serpent. I am not sure how I want the head to look. I go inside and pull up serpent drawings on a web browser. I find two I like and print them out, to use as references, as I continue drawing while on the terrace. It is

⁶ Good morning [Cebuano]

⁷ Basically I am using a pidgin, 'I have no Cebuano.' Wala means "none" or "no" in this context. But if I was to say 'No!' to you, I would say 'Dil' in Cebuano. Still the mean of Dili in this context would be rude and wrong.

⁸ Yes. [Pronounced: Oh-Oh]

⁹ No.

another warm and sunny day. I am in the shade and I have a fan blowing a gentle breeze on me as I continue to sketch on the wood.

I will try an open faced serpent. The widening on the end, being a natural 'stop' for my hand, so as not to slide off. My cross hatching patterns need to reveal the geometric markings on the serpent's skin.

Out front a police car pulls up to a stop. Just what I do not need. I put the wood and pencil down and walk to the gate as a PNP¹⁰ officer approaches the gate.

Sir Roland?

Yes, Sir. How may I help you?

Sir, I wish to inform you that should you hire my niece, no one will accuse you of any misdeed.

Officer, are you referring to the sixteen-year-old who was brought to my house this morning by her mother?

Yes, Sir Roland. My sister tell me she bring Jecim. You say she too young. You afraid you get in trouble.

Yes, that is correct. I want no problems.

It no problem, Sir. She be good for you. But Sir, may I ask why your wife leave you?

I see the gossip is working. Well, Officer, I can tell you what I know. You should ask her family, because no one is speaking to me. Maybe they will say something that is different from what I have been told. Please come in. I will give you tubig¹¹ or Sprite.

Yes! Thanks to you for this. Water is good.

I unlock the gate and allow the officer entry. I don't figure I am in any trouble as he is asking me to hire his niece. I really don't want to do it. But I don't need to be rude to the man.

¹⁰ Philippine National Police.

¹¹ Water

We sit on the terrace, he with a glass of water, and I explain as best I can, what has happened. He is patient and asks a few questions but nothing troubling. As it is pissing me off, I go over the fact that my sister-in-law was supposed to help with the PhilHealth. Now it looks like I will be out of luck with that too.

When I am done, he shakes his head and says, if this is true, then my wife has done a great wrong. It is also true, as he notes, that I will be unable to gain an annulment as there are no grounds for this. Further, beyond the fact there are no grounds, as she has left the country and appears to be the offending party, she would not be able to seek an annulment even if there were grounds. It means I am forever married to my wife, even though she has left me.

I say, *Yes, and because of that, having an underage girl in my home, is dangerous for me.*

Sir, I will speak with your wife's family. If it is as you say, even if you take Jecim as a mistress, no one will complain. I think, many would be happy. But allow me to check first!

Officer, I think talking about taking a mistress of a young girl, such as your niece is illegal. I do not wish to break any law.

No Sir, it is only illegal if the parents or the girl complains.

What about the case of Freddy Aguilar and the sixteen-year-old?

Yes, but that was because a high government official decided to suggest that he would file a child protection case against the parents for allowing this. That was very unusual and it not clear he really can do that. Such relationships are not uncommon here. If the family agrees, there is never a problem. But allow me to talk to the family.

Yes! Absolutely and then please come back here and tell me what they say! I still am not sure what has happened.

Yes, very good, Sir. Thank you for the water. I will return when I know more.

I really don't like where this is headed. From a maid who is too young, we are now talking about a mistress. I don't want to take on a mistress and most certainly not a sixteen-year-old mistress. And

who for Christ's sake thinks that this girl, this Jecim wants to be my mistress anyway?

It is crazy to even think this girl with whom I have not even spoken a word would want to be my mistress.

I feel like I am experiencing the bends. This is way out of control. My hands are shaking. I need something to eat and settle down.

My culinary wizardry produces a sliced Spam and fried egg with mayo sandwich accompanied by beer. And if you are running for the Pepto, hey don't knock it, it tastes great. Any-who... I get my lunch eaten, dishes washed and am back out on the terrace once again when the PNP vehicle pulls up. Three climb out: the officer, his sister, and Jecim.

I open the gate and they enter. I suspect that when a police official wants you to hire his niece, it may be a very stupid thing to refuse. But let's see how this plays out.

Along with two chairs, there are two long bamboo benches with arms and backs on the terrace, so all four of us have seats and room.

The Officer notices my woodworking project and asks to look at it. I hand it to him. *This is an interesting drawing. Will you paint this?*

No I will carve it next.

You can do this carving yourself?

Yes.

I must see this when you finish. It will be a very interesting piece of work. You are an artist?

No, I was an accountant. This is a hobby.

I see. It is good to have such a hobby. ... Sir Roland, I have some news for you. None good, but not bad for you in one way. I speak to the father. He agree with what you tell me and add to it. I think this was her plan for a long time. He try to talk her out of it. He tell her she dishonors her family if she do this.

He hope she change her mind. But she not. He not talk to you for shame. He say, they have no honor now.

I see. But I need her sister's help for the PhilHealth and the 13A visa in two years.

Yes they know this. We talk about it. I tell them that even more shame will come to them if they do not do these things for you. I believe they will. ... Sir there is more. They agree, you are a good man who do no wrong.

That is good to know, I guess.

Yes. I take my sister and niece when I talk to him. They hear all this too. They know why your wife not here. I explain to them that you can never marry again. They understand this, Sir.

Good.

Sir Roland, I think my niece, she want to speak to you.

The girl is looking at the floor. It is hard to believe she wants to speak. I know her uncle and maybe her mother wants her to speak, but surely not the girl.

Sir? Well, want to or not, she is speaking, if still looking at the floor.

Yes?

She lifts her head up and looks right at me. Sir, I know I am plain looking, not gwapa¹² like your wife, but I not evil like her! I will take care of you. I will cook your food, wash your clothes, clean your house, and do all that is needed. I will be your maid. If you want to love me, I will be more. I will do for you, what it means to have honor and not shame, if you allow it.

Now that is a lot for any English impaired speaker to manage. It is quite a statement to make. I get the point about honor, but I fail to see why she thinks putting her sixteen-year-old body under me, has anything to do with Charline's family's shame.

¹² Beautiful

As to the girl not being beautiful, well, there's not a damned thing wrong with the kid that I can see. She is a cutie. But God Almighty, she's only sixteen. I'm sixty-seven.

Still I need a maid. So why fight that. Instead I decide to make it conditional.

First and just so we are clear on this, Jecim, you are very pretty. That is not, in any way, ever, going to be a problem. My eyes are happy to see you. But, I am going to hire you as a maid and that is all. I expect that there may be women I see, from time to time. I do not know if I will ever live with another woman in the house, except as a maid. As you live close to here, I suspect you can go home each night.

No Sir, I will live here if you allow it. It make my job as your maid easier.

Officer, ...

Please call me Jomar. We will be friends I hope.

Very well, Jomar, are you and I clear that I will be seeing other women?

Sir Roland, this is your right! In fact, it is expected. Your wife abandoned you. You have every right to see many women. No woman can complain as no woman may marry you. Even if you take Jecim as a mistress, she needs to understand that she is not a wife and has no say in who you are with!

If you want me to call you Jomar, then I insist you call me Roland. ... Jecim, I want you to understand that this house may be too much for you. In the past, before my wife left, she had a maid and they both worked to keep the house clean. I will still probably need to get another maid.

May I get her for you, Sir?

No, Jecim. As of now, I do not know if you can actually do the work. I agree to hire you with the understanding that if you are unable, you will need to go. I believe you probably can do much of the work. But I do not know how well you can cook for my tastes. I do not know how thoroughly you can clean the house.

Roland, you are correct, of course. My niece needs to prove herself. I am confident that you will be fair in your assessment. It is true that we cannot know if she will be a good cook for you. She is a good cook for her family, but

this is different. Jecim, do you understand that this will be a challenge for you, my niece?

Yes, Uncle. I understand. I will do good. If I do wrong, maybe Sir will explain, so I can do better?

Roland, my niece asks a good question. May she seek your guidance, so that she can improve?

Yes. It is a reasonable request.

Very good, Roland, sister, I must leave you now. I have work to attend to. Jecim, you also have work to attend to! Roland, I am pleased to know you. I look forward to our next meeting.

We shake hands, he kisses his sister's cheek and is off.

You know Madam, I still do not know your name.

She giggles and tells me, *I am Iren, Sir. Sir, may I leave? My other children need my attention!*

Yes, by all means. Please do what you must.

With that Iren almost runs out the gate and down the road. I look at this girl. She is really a sweetie, but can she clean? And why does everyone talk about her being a mistress?

Sir, will you show me what you are doing with that stick?

And so, I show her what the concept is and she claims to be very impressed. How can I know what is real and what is sham anymore? I thought my marriage was real only to find out that it was a sham from the beginning. Charline was pulling a long con. She is a grifter. How do I know Jecim isn't a grifter?

Sir what do you want for supper?

I am not sure we have anything you are familiar with in the kitchen. I may need to cook tonight and we can go shopping in the morning.

May I look, Sir?

Sure.

I take her into the kitchen and am about to show her what I have, but she says, *OK, you go now. I will choose what to make. You go back to your wood please.*

As the afternoon progresses, I notice she has swept up some, as she is sweeping dirt out the front door and off the terrace. I smell some interesting aromas from the kitchen, and I don't hear any catastrophes. I guess it is promising and if all she is, is the maid, does it matter if she isn't honest so long as she doesn't steal?

I have begun the carving on the stick, but just barely, when I am called to supper. I look into the kitchen. It is spotless. She has already cleaned everything. The table is set for one. There is rice in a bowl, a platter of cream dory that looks like it was fried in egg and flour. There is something I think I have had before and liked. If I am right it is mashed eggplant cooked in coconut milk with a massive amount of garlic. Also on the table is a beer.

If it tastes as good as it looks, then I am going to have a wonderful supper.

Jecim is standing by the kitchen door, just watching me. I want to smile, but decide to play it a little indifferent. I sit down, put some rice on the plate, I add some of the vegetable and then a piece of the fish. I haven't tasted a blessed thing. I make a face of concern and then take a spoonful of vegetable and rice.

It is wonderful. I don't show anything on my face. I cut off a piece of the fish with the edge of the spoon and scoop it up with more rice. Wow. She has seasoned it to perfection. Even the rice is cooked correctly. I look up and call out, *Get yourself a plate and join me.*

Is it OK, Sir?

Jecim, you know damned well that this is more than good. This is perfect. Now get a plate. I do not want to eat alone.

She hurries to get her plate and come to the table. She takes just a little bit. I grab her plate and put a fair bit of everything on it, before handing it back.

Sir, I cannot eat this much.

Eat as much as you like. You will be working hard here. Don't starve yourself.

We eat in quiet. She finishes her plate and gives a good belch. I laugh, she blushes.

Sir, where do I sleep?

Explain Honor to me

She is sleeping across the hall from me. I have not touched the girl. It's not that she's hard to look at. Far from it. But what business does a sixty-seven-year-old man have, taking advantage of a girl of sixteen?

Still, I have a deeply troubled sleep, dreaming of what it would be like to taste her charms. I am not feeling honorable tonight, as I dream about deflowering this girl. I am pretty ashamed of myself and wish I had said 'no' to her working here.

Sure, she cooks like an angel. Sure, the kitchen is spotless. Yes, OK, even while she was cooking, she found time to sweep the floors downstairs. So I grant you, she will probably be a dandy maid. With all that, I still should have said, no. She is too tempting. She is too close, and apparently too willing. And I am too weak in the place where rectitude and decency ought to be.

Morning finds me a little rattled. If Jecim is going to stay here, I need a palliative. I need to find an adult female to quell my need. How I do that leaves me as stumped as I was yesterday when I couldn't figure out how to refuse Jecim the position.

I come downstairs to find a breakfast of scrambled eggs with Spam laid out for me. She hasn't made the coffee and seems a bit uptight about how to do it. I show her and her equanimity is restored. I gather that I will not have to show her a second time.

She has found the laundry supplies, as the next time I see her she is carrying my things from yesterday. *Sir, this cannot be all. Where is the rest?*

I took it to 'Cool Bubbles.'

When they say it be ready?

This afternoon.

OK I get it. You have the receipt?

I fish it out of my wallet along with the cash she will need to retrieve it.

May I get some things at the palengke?

Yes, here. And I pass her two thousand pesos.

She hands one thousand back. *This plenty. It is best I not have much money when I go to the palengke.*

Thieves?

Yes, maybe. ... Sir what you do with all the potatoes you buy?

Have you ever had mashed potatoes?

Dili.

OK, well tonight we will beat up the ham and I will make mashed potatoes for you?

You cook?

Not as well as you, but yes, I cook.

Good, I will learn something new!

I return to my project out on the terrace and Jecim goes about her many tasks. She is cleaning, shopping, and picking up laundry, via a tricycle. At four in the afternoon, I put my stick down and go to the kitchen to start peeling potatoes. Jecim sees me and announces she will do it. I hand the scraper/peeler to her and grab a pot. Jecim panics.

What you doing? I can do it!

You, dear, are peeling the potatoes. All I am doing is putting some water up to boil so that we can cook the potatoes, once you have peeled them. This water needs to come to a boil. Relax. I am not doing anything more yet.

I see her eyebrows go up twice¹³. She has accepted my answer.

¹³ Means Yes or OK.

As basic as mashed potatoes are to me, in this rice culture, mashed potatoes is an exotic dish. Filipinos also do not cook with butter. Oh you can find butter in the store, but other than baking, I have never seen it used in the Filipino kitchen. They also don't cook with whole milk. I have seen them use powdered milk, evaporated milk, which they call 'evap,' and they use condensed milk. But not whole milk. I use butter and whole milk in my mashed potatoes. That gets Jecim's attention.

I make some gravy with butter, flour, Knorr's pork bouillon and the whole milk. That surprises her.

Also much to Jecim's surprise, I put the ham ball in the oven, after scoring it deeply, packing it with brown sugar and honey, and then encasing it in aluminum foil. I cook the ham like that for 45 minutes before removing it from the foil and keeping it in the oven for another 25 minutes.

When we are ready to put the potatoes, gravy, and ham on the table, I grab a bottle of Riesling from the fridge, that I was saving, and pour us both a glass. Yes I know she's sixteen, but if she's old enough to work for a living she's old enough for a glass of wine.

If last night was really good Filipino food, tonight is comfort food, American style. Nothing fancy. But the flavors blow Jecim away. She loves it and can't get over how good the potatoes are. The gravy really surprises her. And the sweet wine with the ham? Yeh, she loves that too.

Jecim is looking at me as if she is reassessing some of her assumptions. Maybe she is. I have no way of knowing what is happening in her head.

After supper I relax. I have found an on-line streaming jazz site. I just sit back in an easy chair and float as I listen to the music. Lionel Hampton's *Stardust* plays... A piece from Ray Vega has just finished. Nice. Very nice.

You like this music?

Hub? My eyes are closed and I have no idea Jecim is standing here.

Yeh. You've never heard anything like this?

No. What you call this?

Jazz. This is jazz. What do you think?

How you sing to this? There no words! No tune!

Not all music has words. Not all music has a simple tune. Some music has themes that get explored, developed and played with.

Why that? Not good for karaoke.

Yeh, not good for karaoke, but good for my heart.

She makes a face of confusion. It makes no sense to her. Harold Mabern's *The People Tree* is playing. It's got a nice swing to it.

I think it sound crazy.

Yah, crazy man, crazy!

Ha, you weird!

She walks away shaking her head. She is sweeping the floor again, staying close. Listening but not admitting it. Next up comes Ella... Ella Fitzgerald singing *Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered*.

She comes close to me again. *She sings nice, but not good for Karaoke!*

Why you like this? I not understand.

Jecim, if you see a beautiful picture, do you decide that you do not like it if you can't paint just like it? This is art. Enjoy the art and stop trying to figure how you can do it yourself.

She is just confused. To Jecim, the purpose of music is communal and not art. The concept that music is art, is as completely foreign to her, as I am.

Morning comes and I saunter into the kitchen to find breakfast and coffee waiting for me. My maid has been up for a long while. I see signs that the floors have been swept again. No laundry needs to be done, so instead it appears that she has washed the car.

The terrace has been swept and my stick has been propped up against a chair, waiting for me. But where she is, is unclear as I don't hear or see any sign of her.

I am not concerned. The girl will reappear at some point. I suspect that the problem with her is not if she will stay, but if I can ever get her to leave.

Charline has been gone for how long? Not even a week, and damn, I don't even care. Fuck her. I feel good, if a little horny.

My walking stick patiently awaits my attentions. I remove my knife from my pocket and sit down. My hands run up and down on the wood, feeling the grain and where I need to pay attention. I can tell exactly where I left off yesterday from the feel of it.

I turn my attention to the work and all else slides away. It is the small narrow channels that appear from under the blade that matter now. The design, as penciled on, now gives way to the three dimensional work that will survive, maybe long after I take my last breath.

I am creating something durable. Something that will last. All my adult life, numbers danced in front of me, on spreadsheets and ledgers. Those numbers became meaningless after the next quarter, or the year, or the next tax filing. Numbers that were transitory in value. Numbers that left no mark on the world. Yes they might represent something that happened in the world at a moment in time, but they, themselves were seen by how many and for how long? They were ephemeral. This simple stick is most assuredly not ephemeral. It is durable. It will last.

The numbers were not art. They were not plastic. Yes I might play with the rules a bit, but the GAAP rules mean that to do the work correctly, there was little room to play. What I did was follow the rules and I was good because I knew the rules very well. Yes there are options in how numbers flow to reflect profits and losses. Yes, to be good and make sure the company makes the most from what they got means understanding the rules deeply, but it is still rules.

Color outside the lines and you can go to jail or at least create a real mess.

This stick in front of me has nothing to do with rules. It has to do with heart, and the eye, and the touch, and desire. It is art. As much as the Jazz I listened to last night expressed something, so too does my blade bring forth something essentially new in the world.

There is movement. I sense it, rather than see it. Ah, Jecim has returned. In her hands are plastic bags. I look up with a question on my face. She smiles. It is a big, toothy grin. A happy face.

She puts a bag down, places some pesos in my hand, lifts the other hand up that still holds a bag, and announces, *Utanon¹⁴!*

Where did you get the money?

Your pocket!

Explain please.

You sleep and I not want wake you. I get two hundred pesos from your pocket.

I see.

Breakfast OK?

Yes. It was good. Thank you.

Coffee OK?

Yes, the coffee was fine.

I get another smile. I am not sure I like the fact that she got into my wallet. But she meant no harm. I will think about it.

She grabs the bags and enters the house, to put things away and start on lunch.

I return to my wood as it talks to me and tells me how to cut into it, just so. Ah, yes, just like that...

¹⁴ Vegetable. [Cebuano]

Days flow by. Other than the nightly fight I have in my slumber to take the girl into my bed, all flows like water over rocks and around bends, effortlessly and with a grace that belies what otherwise would be impediments.

Charline enters my thoughts only on rare moments. Sure, when I spy the tricycle operated by her brother drive by, it is jarring, but my mind is, for most part, at peace.

Life, however, does require trips to service the car, get medications refilled, and buy things like lightbulbs. And so, I am at the Mercury Drug store, filling a prescription, when the pharmacist's assistant asks if it is true my wife has left me. Shit! Does gossip ever travel fast here. I smile and acknowledge the fact.

So you alone now? No girlfriend?

Yes. No girlfriend.

She giggles and asks, *No mistress?*

I have to smile as well as this is a nuance that suggests clearly what will come after my answer. *No mistress.*

You think I am pretty? Yeh, there it is.

Yes, you are pretty.

Maybe you will like me?

Ah, yes, maybe. Are you married?

No!

Boyfriend?

No Sir!

Why? You are very pretty. Now I am teasing and challenging her a bit.

No luck I think.

I see. How old are you?

Twenty, Sir.

What's your name?

Zenny.

Do you live with your parents, Zenny?

Yes. That OK?

Yes, it's fine. Do you understand that I am sixty-seven? I am forty-seven years older than you are.

Yes, Sir. Is that a problem for you? And that is a question you just won't get in the States. Bless the Filipina, but it is also the beginning of a long con. Just ask Charline.

Hub, I am not sure. Would your parents be OK if you came to my home for supper?

You cook, Sir?

Please call me Roland or Rolie. No, my maid cooks.

You have a maid? Where she live?

At my house. Why?

You say, no mistress. I think that not true.

Really? Well it is true.

What time you want me to come for supper?

Can you come at six?

Yes. I will come.

Fine, I live by

I know where you live. It is a nice house I think.

I see. OK, see you at six.

I drive home, sort of unhappy I invited her. Why does she think Jecim is a mistress? Why did she seem a bit angry and put out by the fact that I have a live-in maid?

Parking the car, by the side of the house underneath the roof of the carport, I wonder why I, who have been horny every night since Jecim arrived, am uneasy about entertaining a girl who is old enough to fuck legally. I suspect she will enter my bed without an argument, if I want it. So why am I sorry I invited her?

Jecim, we will have a guest for supper.

Who?

Really? Huh... her name is Zenny. Why?

She interested in being your girlfriend?

Maybe. Why?

Wala. It OK if I make the mashed potato, gravy and ham like you make last week?

I don't know. Maybe she won't like it.

Yes, if she not like it, she wrong for you!

I see. OK. But you will need my assistance for making it.

Why? I know what to do now.

Really?

Yes. I will show you. I watch what you do. I know now.

OK. Jecim, remember what your uncle said to you. I can have as many women friends as I want.

Yes, I remember. It true. But they must be good for you. No evil ones. I watch for the evil ones. I not do what Charline's family do.

The fact that Jecim has given herself the job of my protector is a bit humorous.

When she coming?

Six.

You need the wine. We not have any now.

Oh? This is needed?

Yes! Please get it.

I can't. I bought it in Tacloban. There is no way I am going to get there and back!¹⁵ We have some white moscato in the cooler. Use that.

That same?

No, but it is a sweet white wine and it will work.

Sir, please play your jazz for supper?

Jecim, I think you are taking this a bit too far.

For me, Sir. Do this for me. OK?

OK. I can't say I won't like it. Comfort food and jazz? What could be better? I get the sense that Jecim is intent on letting Zenny know that I am more than a meal ticket. I am flesh and blood, with tastes, and a reality she will need to accommodate. That Jecim has decided these things about me are worth noting and protecting, is enlightening.

I am back on the terrace. The carving is complete. I have given it some oil, wiped it down, and I am giving the wood another sanding with super fine sandpaper. I will oil it once more, wipe it down again and buff it. That will be it. It will be finished.

It is six in the evening and Zenny has yet to arrive. Jecim giggles about Filipino time. I know what that means, but Zenny is probably not fifteen minutes from here via tricycle. So we should see her soon enough.

At six twenty I am beginning to think that she might not show. Jecim has no such concerns. She informs me that the girl will appear. And sure enough at six twenty-nine a tricycle pulls up to our gate.

I am about to get up from my easy chair to meet her at the gate, but Jecim is out the door and waiting for my guest to request entry

¹⁵ Tacloban is on another island and to get there, either a boat trip is required, or a very long drive over the Eastern Nautical Highway which via bridges takes you from Biliran, to Poro Island, and to the island of Leyte. Tacloban is on Leyte, but once on the island, it's a long drive. So there is no quick trip to the supermarket where the wine can be purchased, and return in the same afternoon. It isn't possible.

before any further action is taken. Sure enough, Zenny, who can't see Jecim, calls out *Ay-oooo!*

Jecim goes to the gate and admits our guest. They are engaged in discussion as the two enter the house. But as Zenny enters fully, she stops and looks around. She sees me, gives me a curious smile, and cocks her head a bit, before speaking. *This is a beautiful home. Jecim tells me you are truly alone here. She also says you are a very good man. Why did your wife leave you if you are so good?*

Allow Jecim to tell you. She knows all about it and I suspect the telling will be faster and more complete in Cebuano.

You trust her with the intimate details?

I really didn't have anything to do with that. She heard it all from my wife's family.

Your ex-wife?

No, Zenny, my wife. I am still married and will always be married. Come let us eat while the food is still hot and allow Jecim to tell you the story.

I get her to sit at the table and I sit. Jecim, puts the food down on the table and I get a look from Zenny of pure fright.

What is this? Where is the rice?

Before I can say a word, Jecim is speaking. *Sir you forgot the music.*

I get up and get the music stream playing as Jecim, I gather, starts explaining that this is American food I taught her how to cook, because following that Zenny asks me if I really taught Jecim how to cook.

No, not really. She watched me last time and announced she knows now. We will see! And I take a sizeable scoop of the mashed potatoes, drown it in gravy, and then take a slice of the ham. Jecim is pouring wine for the three of us.

There is more conversation between the two girls. It seems to be about the wine. Zenny tastes it and seems to like it. I dig in. Zenny

takes a taste of the potatoes. Jecim, I guess, tells her to put the gravy on it. She does and tastes again. She likes it.

As I continue to eat what is every bit as good as I made the last time, Jecim and Zenny eat while Jecim tells about Charline. It goes on for a while.

The wine is all but polished off. There isn't much left of the potatoes or gravy either. We all push our chairs back and Jecim excuses herself to take care of the dishes and the cleanup.

You really like this music?

Yes, why?

It is odd.

It is very different from what you are used to, I am sure.

Your food is odd too.

It is food I grew up eating. I think Jecim cooked it so you might know a little more about me.

Same for her asking you to play the music?

Yes, I think so.

You know the girl is only sixteen?

Yes. I felt she was too young to be here.

Why she here?

Her mother and her uncle, a PNP officer, said she was not too young.

Oh! ... Jecim say you want many women, not just one.

That is not exactly the truth, but close enough. I am married to a woman I will never see again. There is no way I can have another wife. I can never give a mistress what my wife has and will get. It isn't possible.

But you have no one now?

Yes. There is no one now.

What if you find someone who is good but demands that she is the only one?

I am married so there is always someone else.

That not what I mean.

I think I know what you mean. But a mistress can never own her man.

I think I will go home now. Thank you for supper.

You are welcome.

I escort her out the gate and watch her grab a tricycle before re-entering the house.

She gone?

Yes.

Good.

The redoubt

Why is it good?

She not right for you.

Well, I suspect she agrees with you. But why do you think she is not right.

*She want to replace your wife. She want to be **the** wife. She is very religious. She not tell you, but never drink wine before. She embarrassed to say 'no' to you, but she not want it. Your music, she say that must be devil music. She say, that music not normal. ... She happy you not touch me, but she tell me we both bad for me living here. She tell me to go back to my mother.*

I see.

She say you must be very lonely and needing a woman, now that your wife has left. Are you lonely, Sir?

I am not lonely, but I miss being with a woman in one way.

The sex, Sir?

Yes.

It OK Sir. I willing.

No. It is not OK. You are sixteen.

If I older, it be OK?

Yes.

Why?

Why what?

Why it OK if I older but not now?

If you were older, you would know the answer and not have to ask.

You are difficult! Why you so difficult? And she walks off towards her bedroom.

What a fucking mess.

I have a wife who does not want me. A woman who doesn't know me from Adam, but would probably bed me, evil music and wine included, if she could be the only one and have all I have and this house. And a sixteen-year-old girl/maid, who wants me without condition and accepts all I am, but is just too fucking young!

And me? Hell, I am sleeping alone again tonight. Fuck that!

I grab the car keys and drive down to the resto-bar. I ain't really hungry but I order some fries, a beer, and a brandy. Yeh, I could have had some brandy at home, but that would just make me more depressed tonight, more alone in the house with that damned sixteen-year-old who wants me to fuck her.

The music is too loud, the beer too warm and the fries have yet to arrive.

I must look like I could use company because a girl sits down by me.

In places like this there are bar girls. Some are prostitutes. Some just hoping to get lucky with a guy who has some coins. Some just trying it out for the first time. It's a mix. You never know. I guess if you are down in Angeles City, they are all pro's. But here, in tiny Naval, there are almost no foreigners and the pro's aren't the vultures you might find in a place like Angeles City. They just need money for rice tomorrow. That doesn't mean they won't lie to you. They sure will.

I look over at her. She's small, maybe four nine, or ten inches. She ain't a ten on the beauty scale, but she is a bunch better than a five. Call it an eight. I'm not drunk, so take it for what it is. Her hair is straight and black. I assume the eyes are black but in this light, who the fuck can tell. She's wearing a T-shirt, leggings and flip-flops. She's OK. Maybe a little heavy on the make-up.

What's your name?

Jezryl.

Hub? Spell it.

She does. Names here are slippery. I have no idea if anyone in the world will know her as Jezryl tomorrow. It's a weird name, but there are many weird names here.

How old are you?

Eighteen. OK?

OK.

You like me?

I guess.

What your name?

Roland. You can call me Rolie.

You want to go now?

That fast? You don't want a drink or something to eat?

You buy me something to eat?

Sure. What do you want?

She calls over to a member of the wait staff, *Kuya, BBQ baboy!*¹⁶

The guy smiles, raises his eyebrows twice, and disappears into the kitchen.

My fries arrive and she is eating those while waiting for her BBQ. I ask for a second order of fries. It arrives at about the same time as her BBQ comes. We share those fries as well. The kid is clearly hungry. I ask her what she wants to drink. She orders a Sprite.

Once all that is finished, I ask if she would like to order something else, but she says she is *busog*¹⁷! *We go now, Rolie.*

Where do you want to go?

¹⁶ Brother, pork bbq! This requires further explanation. The guy isn't her actual brother. It is how Filipinos see each other as related in one family.

¹⁷ Full

With you?

For how long?

How long you want?

If I say an hour?

OK. Hour.

If I say four hours?

You want four hours? OK.

If I say until morning?

You give me breakfast?

Sure.

OK!

All week?

Really? OK with me. Whatever you want. It OK.

OK let's go.

As we walk out she is pulling me to the tricycles. I pull her back and almost have to tug her toward my car.

Yours?

Yes.

Nice! OK. Where we go?

Home.

No!

What do you mean 'no'?

Your wife!

There is no wife at home.

*Tinuod*¹⁸?

Yes, really.

Where she?

USA.

Oh! Filipina?

*Yes, dual*¹⁹.

Oh!

We drive in silence and ten minutes later I get out, open the gate and drive under the car port. Jecim is probably asleep. The house is locked up. I unlock and let us in, relocking and escorting Jezryl to my bedroom.

I haven't been with an eighteen-year-old since I was a freshman in college. Tonight I will enjoy the delights, though a condom will most assuredly be required. I have no idea who else has plumbed these depths.

I sit up on the bed and ask her to strip for me.

She's not totally clueless as she gets my meaning and gives me a show, starting with her T-Shirt. She flashes her bra and then hides it again, turning her back to me as the shirt is removed and tossed to the side of the room. Her back is still to me as she slides the leggings over and off her ass and down her legs. She steps out of them one leg at a time. Her back still to me as she flips the leggings on to my lap. She is looking at me over a shoulder as she undoes the clasp of her bra and flips it to me.

She bends over a bit sticking her ass out and wiggling it towards me before sliding her panties down; down her legs, over her ankles, and stepping out of them entirely.

¹⁸ Really? [Cebuano]

¹⁹ Dual citizen. A person with both a Philippine and US passport.

Now completely naked, she turns around and looks at me, with one hand on her hip, a smile on her face, and a little laugh in her voice. OK?

Yeh, OK. Come here.

Her breast are nice sized. Maybe B's? Certainly larger than my wife's. She has more in the hips too. The face may be an 8 but the body is a definite 9.

She climbs onto the bed and begins to remove my clothing. I am not in any way trying to slow her progress. She is a good liar. She has to be. She tells me I am handsome.

I am not trying to romance her. I don't need to impress her. I don't care if she ever returns. I want to fuck. I need to be inside her.

I grab a condom I purchased a couple of days ago in the hope that I might need it some day and roll the thing on as Jezryl watches.

I am hard, but the brandy I have been drinking tonight has taken the edge off. I suspect I will stay hard for a while. Here's hoping the old equipment is ready for a run around the track.

I have the girl on her back and push in. She's tight but no virgin. She tips her pelvis up towards me to get the best penetration. I sink all the way in. My reward from the girl is a sigh. I run into her repeatedly, she arching her body to get the most out of the fucking.

She is a cute kid and fun to be with. She is having a good time and that makes what I am doing less creepy I guess.

I turn her over and take her cunt from the back. I play with her tits. I play with her clit and send her into what I guess must be an orgasm.

I am nowhere near cumming as I ram her hard over and over. Her cunt is hot and wet now. It is almost soupy. I hear slapping noises from her cunt as I pound her.

Her clit is awash with fluids as I attack it again. Again she cums. This one is more massive. She is crying out *O, O*. I have no idea if she is saying *yes, yes*, or just exclaiming that sound.

It feels so good to be inside her. It feels so good to have a female *want* me inside her. And that finally hits my brain in just the right way. My cum spills into the condom. I am done.

I roll off and onto my back. She snuggles with me, her head on my left breast. Her fingers drawing circles through the hair on my chest. Her right leg draped over my right leg.

That nice, Rolie. You happy?

Yes. Very happy. It was very nice.

She moves her hand down to my pride and strokes the limp thing.

You think I make that hard again?

I doubt it.

She slides down and after removing the condom and tossing it to the floor, she takes all of soft me in her mouth and sucks for all she's worth. For a while there is not a thing happening. But she is nothing if not persistent.

There is a twinge now and a slight tumescence but it is not substantial. My mind wanders to Jecim. I wonder what she would be like in bed. How tight a cunt she might have. And the flag is now at half-staff.

I wonder what it would be like with both of them in bed. The flag is flying now. I grab another condom from the nightstand, roll it on and Jezryl over onto her back.

There is no way I will come again and I am slowing down, but I feel her cum once, twice... and I am pretty much done in. I roll back off her and hold her tight to me.

I stay here? We sleep now?

Yes you stay the night and we sleep now.

Good. And as God is my witness, she falls asleep then and there.

The morning sun always wakes me up, except for this morning. This morning it is screaming from downstairs that is awakening me. Jezryl is not in bed, and the screaming I hear is from Jecim.

I get out of bed as fast as my sixty-seven-year-old body will allow, slide into yesterday's slacks without briefs and leave the bedroom.

When I get downstairs I am treated to a sight of two girls with their backs arched, fists in the air, and that air filled with screaming from both of them.

Stop it! is the best I can offer at the moment.

Jecim is wild eyed as she turns to me with anger and screams, *How old you think she is?*

Eighteen. Why?

She not! She lie!

She was in a bar. She had to be eighteen.

You are a fool! You see her drink alcohol?

No.

Jecim is still screaming. *What she drink?*

Sprite.

Why you think that? You stupid?

I turn to Jezryl, *How old are you?*

But Jecim screams again, *I tell you! She sixteen. Same as me. You won't fuck me but you fuck this whore!*

How do you know her age?

We in school together since kinder 1! I know her all my life.

I see. Jezryl, are you going to deny what Jecim says.

No.

Jecim, tell me, do you want me to treat you like a whore? That is what I did with Jezryl last night. There was no romance. No loving. No tenderness. Just

come here, take clothes off and fuck with a condom. And I use a condom because I have no idea if she has any diseases. Is that really what you want from me?

She turns to Jezryl and rather than scream, she is almost crying as she asks, *Is what he say true?*

I fuck him for the food last night, for breakfast this morning and any money he will give me. It happen like he say. I will fuck him now if he want. No problem. I fuck him whenever he want. You not let him fuck you? Why that? Why he need me? What wrong with you?

I want him to love me. But he say I am too young. He not touch me. I will allow it, but he not do it. I love him. ... She looks at me, at her old school mate, at the floor, and asks the girl, *You hungry?*

Yes.

Come to the kitchen. I will make something for you. I get the breakfast he promise you.

I start following them to the kitchen, but Jecim turns towards me and informs me, *You wait. I feed the girl now. Then I will make your breakfast and coffee,* before turning on her heels and giving me the sight of her back as she walks off.

I don't think I deserve that, but I understand her feelings.

I guess I might as well go back upstairs, shower and dress properly.

There are times when the world as I know it crumbles in front of my eyes. I had a huge problem fucking a sixteen-year-old. But that is what I did. Would I fuck the girl again? Now that I have already done it? Yes.

So, why am I still hung up on not fucking Jecim? I am confusing myself.

I didn't feel much for Jezryl last night. Last night she was just an eighteen-year-old whore I didn't know. Now she is a sixteen-year-old schoolmate of Jecim. She has a history and connections to my world through her schoolmate. And I still want to fuck her.

And I want to fuck Jecim. She says she loves me. That is silly. And maybe that is what I am afraid of. What she thinks is love, isn't. What happens when she figures that out? It's OK to fuck someone who doesn't love you, but fucking someone who thinks she does is a very different thing.

I don't think I trust love any more. How many times did Charline say she loved me? None of it was true. Not one time. Yet she kept the lies up for years.

A half hour or so later I am back downstairs. A breakfast for me is on the table, my coffee has been brewed and both girls are sitting at the table in quiet conversation.

I am in the middle of my meal and have just put my coffee cup down when Jecim asks me, *How much you going to pay her?*

I don't think that is any of your business. Besides, who said I am done with her?

I make it my business. You want to fuck her again. Do it! Take her back upstairs!

Do I need to call your mother and uncle and tell them that you are not working out for me?

OK, it not my business. But I want to change how you pay her. I want to change what is happening. If you tell me to leave, I will go. You don't have to call anyone.

Explain. What do you want to happen?

Let her stay here a week. No sex. We feed her. She sleeps here. She does not have to work, like she working. She helps me with the house. That is all. For a week, she is safe. At the end of the week, she goes.

Jezryl, is this what you want?

No!

Jecim? Why did you think this was a good idea?

Ask her what she wants, stupid!

You know, I am not happy with you calling me stupid, right?

Ask her and see if what I say is wrong.

Jezryl, what do you want?

You.

Excuse me? Explain better.

I want to live here like Jecim, but be in your bed. I will clean and cook and do what Jecim do. I will make it easier for her. I will teach her how to make you very happy, like I make you happy last night.

I see. You want to share me with Jecim, if you can stay?

Yes!

I turn to Jecim, OK call me Stupid again. I deserve it. Why don't you want that?

I do, but I know you will say, no. Do I get to call you Rolie, too?

Ouch. Man alive you are really pissed off.

What you think? Yes I am mad! You do what I say about payment?

I will think about it, and about what she has asked for as well. If I do what she asks for, that makes you just like her. Is that what you really want? She wants this because it is safe. If you are in my bed, it isn't for love. It's for safety. You know it and more importantly, I know it. But I have an assignment for you. Take her to the medical clinic and ask them to test her for all STD's. Ask them how long it will take to get all the results. Unless she runs away before the tests come back, she stays here, untouched for that time. OK?

Yes! You want me tested too? She is crying. I have hurt her feelings, but right now I don't care. I don't like this talk of love.

Are you a virgin?

Yes.

Then, No.

Salvation on a small scale

There is the concept of the hooker with the heart of gold. That is pure drivel. But the concept that all prostitutes are reprobates without a moral center is equally nonsensical. Prostitution is a decision which is informed by economics, as much, if not more, than anything else.

But you know that, right? And you know that a hungry sixteen-year-old is not going to think twice about the choice if it provides the ability to fill a belly when there are no other viable options. So why the kid is hooking is not exactly a fucking mystery. Why she doesn't have a family to provide for her, will, I am sure, become clear soon enough. But if Jecim thought there was an issue I needed to fear in that area, I have no doubt that she would not have pushed for the solution she requested.

The girls do go to the clinic as I requested. That was ten days ago. I haven't touched either of them in the intervening hours. What I need to know, at the moment, is how well the two can coexist here, without friction, before I change anything else.

I have also been thinking about what I need and want. That isn't as simple as I thought in one way, and very simple in another.

What I don't want is love. I don't believe in it anymore. It is a term without real meaning. Love is a lie. The need for safety, now... that is real. The need for compassion and caring is real; of offers of compassion and caring, as based on benefits to be received. These are security, stability, safety, solvency, dependability, pleasure, and the ability to achieve long term personal goals.

There is a calculus in relationships that survive. There is a calculus in why they end. I can see that very clearly now. Love, as some suggest, has nothing to do with it. It is short hand for, you meet my needs, for now. It means nothing more than that.

There is no fucking way in the world that I am going to believe it means anything more in general and I, sure as hell, am not thinking it means much at all when uttered by a kid of sixteen years.

Jomar, the PNP officer, thinks it's OK if I take his niece to my bed. I suspect it's because he believes that her economic prospects are better being my mistress than they are in any other possible scenario open to the girl. He may be right.

Jecim saw the danger in the possibility of my taking an older companion. She knows I will not limit myself to one person now. That the concept of trusting that 'one' person is not something I will ever do again. So what does she do? She gloms on to her school friend. Then she is less at risk, and maybe she hopes that I can and will limit myself to two companions. She sure as hell didn't require Jezryl to be tested as she wanted Zenny tested.

It is a reasonable assumption on her part, and she may be correct. Maybe she hopes that by including Jezryl as a sexual companion, it will put to an end my resistance to bedding her. In that she is right. I have already come to that conclusion though I haven't said a word to her about it.

There remains the open issue of whether Jezryl is here for the long term, or until her belly is full for long enough that she feels confident to move on.

In that, I don't really care. I will enjoy her for as long as she stays and be OK when she moves on. I no longer think of any relationship as being 'forever.' They aren't. And if both girls move on, it will not surprise me and it will not hurt me. I will enjoy them while they are here. That is all.

I am not building my hopes and dreams around them. My world does not depend on them, nor does it depend on any one person. I guess if I was an extrovert, I might need a coterie of associates and loved ones from whom to take sustenance. I am anything but that. I have always been a solitary person. The guy who could disappear behind a stack of forms, papers, numbers, and books. Now I disappear behind a block of wood.

At the moment, the block of wood in question is a nice highly figured chunk of Amboyna, the burl of Narra wood. I think I can make some beautiful figurines from it. Others might have chosen to use it for a table top, or wall sconces, but this chunk of wood is art, in and of itself and that which comes from it should be art as well.

I am thinking of visual jazz. Take a form, a recognizable form and find a way to stretch it and transform it, while at the same time, still honoring it. When we hear it, yes that is jazz. I am not sure what to call it when we do that with sculpture, but it is what I want to do with this wood.

And so, while the girls figure out their dance moves within the confines of the sanctuary that is my home and the world it represents for them, my mind, my heart, my passion, is encompassed by, and pulled into, this block of wood.

I work on it from early each morning until the light dwindles around five in the evening. The girls don't allow me to do things such as clean up the shavings, and so I retire to the bedroom, wash up, shower and change into fresh clothing. I come down each night for supper at six.

They have jazz playing for me, a beer on the table, and my plate set out. They may have already eaten or will eat later. I eat alone. The house is quiet, peaceful, and my countenance is relaxed. It may not be the way Filipinos like to live, missing the noise and hubbub of their preferred world, but this is now my world, and it is mine alone. I do not share it with a wife. I do not make compromises. It is how I want to be.

Tonight, once dinner is over, and my plate is cleared, at Jezryl's suggestion, while I remain in my dinner chair, I receive a "chair massage." Jezryl did it the first few times but she has been getting Jecim involved. The two work in tandem. To say that I like it, is to acknowledge the obvious.

Following the massage, I move to my easy chair in the Sala, where the girls bring me a warmed glass of good brandy. Filipinos drink

brandy over ice. I find that a crazy custom. Brandy, just like its upper class version, cognac, should be warm when imbibed.

Speaking of cognac, all cognac is brandy. It comes from a specific grape, the white ugni grape. In Europe, it not only has to be of that grape, but from the Cognac region of France. No such rule regards the region exists outside of Europe. Cognac is typically more expensive than is Brandy. The funny thing is I don't like cognac. I prefer the Spanish brandies far more.

And so, with warm brandy, good jazz, and a foot massage on feet that have been freed of my indoor sandals, I relax. A pasha, a potentate of my domain.

Eventually, all this gives way to a book I am reading at the moment, until the hour of nine and time for me to retreat to the bedroom and bed, alone.

The thought does come across my mind. What am I waiting for? I could have taken Jecim any of these past ten days. I gather that Jezryl's tests have come back negative. She is disease free.

They know it too. They know that it will be my choice. That I am not pawing them, not drooling, and grasping, has the benefit of giving me the power, and removes it from them. Let them stew a little longer. The first one I take will be Jezryl. I want Jecim to feel that fully. When I take her, I want it to be one of total and unquestioned submission.

Maybe I will start tomorrow. Maybe.

Speaking of tomorrow, I need to make a trip to the pharmacy, the Mercury Drug store. I have no idea if I will run into Zenny. If I do, maybe I will ask her to add some condoms to my purchases, just to tease her or tick her off. In any case, she is not on my shopping list.

But now it is time for bed, and rest.

Mornings start earlier for me here than they did back in the States. I am up here at about five thirty each morning as the sun brightens the bedroom. By six fifteen I am drinking coffee downstairs. By seven I am out on the terrace with my wood. These days, my

walking stick leans up against the wall waiting for the opportunity to impress those who will encounter it as I walk past them.

Today, the trip to the pharmacy is too far for a walk. I need to drive there and so my good friend will hold the wall up in my absence.

But I have two hours with my precious wood before I leave for the pharmacy. Inside the small block that I have cut from the larger chunk, I will find the form that strives to exist in the world. It has not come out yet, but parts are close to the surface. That form needing to be released is there. I can sense it. I can feel a tingling in my fingers as they move over the surface.

But the time arrives and I put her down. Yes my wood seems to contain a 'her.' That is how I think about her.

And so, I put her down gently, on a soft cloth, clean myself up, climb into the car and drive down the road. I live on a small lane off the main road, but there is only one main road.

About the main road... This small island has a mountain in the middle, the road is circumferential and it is called Biliran Circumferential Road. On one side is the ocean and the other the mountain. (There is one road that crosses the high country and it does end, or begin, in Naval. But if you are shopping, you won't take it. It goes up to the falls and that's nice.)

Naval is a small piece of land on a small island. The population is a little less than fifty-five thousand folks within forty square miles. Naval is pretty much square, six miles by less than seven miles that leans a bit. Much of it is high country with small populations. So leaving the house is only a question of which way on the road.

Driving on the road is a slow affair and I reach the pharmacy in ten minutes. Neither to my happiness or despair, I do not see Zenny. I approach the counter, display my senior citizen card, my booklet for authorized purchases, my prescription, and a debit card from my bank.

The pharmacy assistant, a cute girl of maybe in her early twenties, takes it, looks at the paperwork, looks briefly at me again, a very

brief smile crosses her lips, before asking me how many pills I want.

I'll take ninety, three months' worth, please.

Yes, Sir. Just a moment, Sir Roland.

OK, so she got my name off the script or the card. That is to be expected. There is no other customer in the place. The assistant returns, hands me the senior citizen slip to sign. Her name tag says Myra. I sign and hand it back to her. *Thank you, Myra.*

Yes, Sir. Sir, you know you are the talk of many here?

No, I am not aware. I have no idea why I should be the subject of anyone.

It is Zenny, Sir. She say you are a good man but have weird tastes and weird ideas.

I see. Well Zenny is a tabi²⁰.

Yes Sir, but I admit I am interested. Maybe I will like it?

Like what, Myra? The music?

Everything.

I see. Are you single?

Yes! Of course yes. And no boyfriend, Sir! I live with my sister. There is no problem, Sir. Maybe you think I look OK?

I think you look very nice, gwapa.

Thank you, Sir!

So you want to come for supper?

Very much yes!

Well, if you really think you like weird, bring a bag with you. OK, so that is uncalled for, uncouth, and unfair. But she was the one who pushed the 'I like weird' shit and I don't really want another night like I had

²⁰ Gossip [Cebuano]

with Zenny. Better to stop her in her tracks right now if I can, in case she is just faking it.

Yes, Sir. That was my plan.

Good. So I guess I need a few condoms as well. Why don't you pick out the ones?

She giggles and goes about doing exactly that. I guess it is going to be an interesting night.

I am amused, amazed, at the same time not amazed, and a little irritated that it took a wife abandoning me to see reality for what it is.

I get home long before lunch time, so after putting things away in the bathroom and bedroom, I return to her, who has been waiting patiently, to be released from her wooden cocoon.

I wait until lunch to give my pair of girls the warning, instructions, and guidance, regarding how I want the evening to go. The results are interesting and instructive.

Jezyrl, thinks the whole thing is a blast and she is all for it. Jecim, is pissed, scared, and freaking out. I allow her to vent for a good few minutes. I am going to say something, but it isn't required. Jezyrl does it for me. It tells me a little more about how Jezyrl is ordering her world.

Friend! Don't be stupid. You and me, we his girls! This Myra, she his plaything for the night. She a whore he don't pay for. He just feeds her. Maybe we like her, maybe not. We like her, good. We not like her, she not stay. We his girls. We the ones who make him happy. He know that. Why you not know this? I don't care who he fucks. It only fucking. I like it when he fuck me, cause I like to fuck. But I don't care if he fuck another. That OK. He ours.

Jecim looks at her friend and looks like she wants to cry. But she turns to me and only asks, *Is she right?*

Yes. So long as you want to stay, you are my girls. Myra is not.

Am I here forever?

Forever is a funny thing. I had a lifetime warranty on a watch once. It died after five years. I filed under the warranty for a replacement. It was a lifetime warranty. right? Well the company told me the lifetime for that watch was five years. You are here now. And unless you start causing me problems I will not ask you to leave. If you never leave and I never ask you to leave, then in the end, you and I will agree it was forever. For now, yes you are my girls.

What you ask us to do, you making it hard on this Myra to think she has you to herself?

Yes.

OK. OK, I do it.

For the afternoon ‘she of the wood’ holds my undivided attention. I am not giving the girls or Myra any of my time. She wants out and I am trying carefully, so as not to nick or hurt her, to get her out of that which she tells me is a prison. She wants to feel hands on her. She wants to feel the ocean breezes bring moist air to her. She is not patient, but I must be. It is slow and careful work.

As the light dims, I have no option but to disappoint the girl and put her down on the soft cloth to await the morning, once again.

Up in my room, I shower, shave, and dress. The bedroom is in good shape. I would have made sure of it, but my girls have done it for me.

Dinner tonight is not the ham and potato dinner of last time. I have taught them how to make baby back ribs just the way I like them, along with my own bbq sauce recipe. I have also taught them how to make coleslaw to my liking, and hushpuppies. It will be a beer night, as I can’t conceive of wine with this.

I told the girls to get some of the small cloth dish towels, wet them down and put them folded on plates by both table settings.

Jazz is playing and all is ready when Myra rides up on a motor scooter, a small bag slung over her shoulder. She is not wearing a helmet. Instead, she has a scarf under a ball cap. The rest of her is encased in white shorts and a very thin see through red blouse over a black bra.

I am in the Sala, in my easy chair. The girls meet her at the door. They take the bag that probably has her overnight things from her and ask her if she would like to freshen up. She does and they escort her upstairs to my bedroom and leave her there with her bag. I want Myra to come down when the table is already set and waiting. I tell the girls to call her to come down only then. That happens, as she comes down at just the right time.

When she does come down, she is in a flowing red diaphanous skirt of the same material as the blouse. Her black panties are in evidence. If she is trying to make a point, she has.

At maybe five feet, she is taller than are my two girls. She is seated at the table and I join her.

Sir, I am prepared to eat something I have never eaten before. Am I going to be right in that?

I have no idea. You will have to tell me, once you are served.

I had understood you had one maid. But I see two. Did Zenny report incorrectly?

Zenny reported what she saw. The world is not a static thing.

Yes. This is true. She also said that the maid was not a mistress. Is that true?

If you are asking me if the maid who was here when Zenny was here, was then or is now my mistress, all I can say is that there is no mistress in this house. Discussing this further is improper, and I don't intend to make an exception tonight. All else I will say is that Jecim and Jezryl, keep this house as I want it kept. And to that extent, they are here as long as they do that and they want to stay.

This music... what do you call it?

Jazz. This is jazz.

It's nice. Not evil. Fun to listen to, I think.

I am happy you like it.

At this point, as we dig into our ribs, slaw, and hushpuppies, I have the girls behind us. Jecim, is massaging my shoulders, Jezryl is

doing Myra's. I get a curious look from Myra. I ignore it and pay attention to the food in front of me.

My instructions are for them to keep their hands active. To grab the towel when needed and clean a chin, or fingers on occasion, but to be connected the entire meal.

If Jezryl senses that Myra is OK with it, she is to expand the scope a bit and give a breast a squeeze, a cheek a stroke, her temples attention. Jezryl thinks the plan is genius and works it to the hilt. Myra may not be into girls, but Jezryl has her squirming in her chair as the meal progresses.

For Jezryl, sex is a physical thing. And she loves it. It seems that it doesn't matter if it is a boy or a girl. For her it is play. I have heard her express that to Jecim a few times. Now I see the proof of the claim. But it was what she had said to Jecim, which gave me the idea to do this in the first place.

What do you call this?

Oh, it's a bushpuppy. Do you like it?

Yes! The cabbage, what do you call it? It is very good.

Coleslaw. I am glad you like it.

I like everything, including the attentions of your girl. Why are you doing this?

To see if you are just talk or if you really will be a good companion for me.

How I doing?

I don't know we have just started.

Open Wide, now.

After supper is done, we move to two easy chairs in the Sala. Jecim has warmed up two glasses of brandy in snifters. A glass is handed to Myra. She looks at me, unsure about what is happening.

Relax and enjoy.

This is warm. What you give me?

Brandy.

It too dark for Fundador. Fundador served on ice!

This is not the Fundador you know, and it is best when warm. Take a sip.

Oh! This very different. Good too. What they doing? Oh, nice!

I told the girls to give us foot massages once we were in the chairs. Jecim will give me mine and it will be a straight forward massage. Jezryl has different instructions.

I gave her options depending on whether our guest had a skirt or pants on. Based on the presence of the skirt, Jezryl is to work up Myra's legs as far as the girl allows. The ultimate goal, which I was sure Jezryl would be unable to reach, is to spread Myra's legs and eat her out. I was sure that it wasn't going to happen, when I gave the instructions. Now, I am not sure. Myra has not said stop once. Not to the food; not to the fondling of her breasts; not to the Brandy; and so far, not to Jezryl's hands on her calves.

The girl is clearly not faking anything. Exactly how game she is, will be interesting to see, but from now on, there is nothing disqualifying likely to happen.

She turns her head to me. *Roland, are you trying to see how far you can go before I say, stop? Because I am not going to say it.*

How can you be sure? I might be a monster.

You not. Everything you do, it about pleasure. It a test. To see if I want pleasure, or I have rules so I say, no.

Were you the top of your class in school?

She giggles. *Yes. See, I know things.*

I don't know how much you know, but I know you are smart. OK, so lift up your hips, allow Jezryl to slide your panties off and spread your legs.

I get eyebrows firmly up twice. A few words are passed between Myra and Jezryl, before the hips are lifted, and the panties removed.

Myra slouches in the chair to give Jezryl easy access. As Jezryl dives in, I pull Jecim up and onto my lap.

Up to this very moment, I have never touched the girl. Now my arms are around her and I bring her in for a kiss. She is unsure at first, but once she figures out what I am after, she commits to it and our lips meet firmly, softly, and with emotion.

Her arms grab onto me, as the kiss continues. From the other chair we hear sounds of sexual gratification. Myra is more than putting up with the activities, she is getting off on Jezryl's tongue.

Jecim whispers in my ear, *Do I need to do that?*

I answer, *Only if you decide you want to.*

My answer seems to make her happy and her lips find mine with even more enthusiasm. We eventually break and I call over to Myra, *Sip the brandy as she goes down on you. The combination is not to be missed.*

I get a look from Myra that I can't interpret. She reaches for the brandy, looks at me again, and takes a sip as Jezryl continues her activities. I see Myra swallow a bit of the liquid as Jezryl's tongue makes a slow transit across cunt and clit. *Oh fuuuuck.* She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, opens her eyes, turns her head to me and simply closes and opens those eyes again. She is just looking at me and crying. I don't think it is a bad cry. I suspect she is learning how much of life she has not experienced yet.

I whisper into Jecim's ear that I will take her virginity tomorrow. She is a good girl and she will be a mistress from this day forward. That gets another kiss.

I get up, pull Jezryl off Myra, pull Jezryl in for a sloppy kiss and whisper to her to see if she is able to seduce Jecim tonight. Rather than whisper back she bites my earlobe, grabs Jecim and pulls her into the kitchen.

I pull Myra up and walk her upstairs to my bedroom. I do not have to wonder if we will fuck. The question in the air for me is where she fits into my world.

We enter the bedroom and I decide to give her the same request I gave Jezryl that first night. *Take your clothes off.*

I get a smile and a request of hers. *Can we have some Jazz in here?*

We can, and as the music fills the air, she takes what she is hearing and in something close to interpretative or modern dance, she uses the music to guide her movements as the clothing comes off with a sexual energy that is real and intense.

Now quite naked, she moves to me and undresses me in the same musically driven, intense fashion.

We mount the bed. Condoms from today's trip sit atop the night stand. I tell her, *Choose which one you want me to wear.*

She looks at me and asks, *Do you use these with your girls?*

Each girl has to answer that question on her own. If she goes without and gets pregnant, she is committing to stay for as long as our child is still a child. If she does not want to risk that, the condom is required.

Are you sure the girls and you are disease free?

Yes. Are you?

Yes. You wasted your money with those condoms.

If Jezryl was an 8 in face and a 9 in body, Myra is a 9 in face and a 9¾ in body. There is nothing underdeveloped about her. Her breasts are full and stand up nicely against her trim frame. Her hips flair out far more than the average Filipina. Her shape is simply magnificent. Her cleanly shaven cunt glistens with the juices of desire.

I mount the girl and plunge in. It is evidently what she wants. Her hands and legs wrap around me. Her warm, slick cunt engulfs my dick, her lips seek out and find mine. Her hands hold on to me tightly.

It is a ritualized rut, a mating. The foreplay started at the supper table, was intense in the easy chairs, both via my surrogate, Jezryl. And now, the culmination, the joining.

Her breasts are against me. Her mouth is on mine. Her tongue plays inside my mouth. Hips and legs in motion.

I feel it build inside her. I feel the wash of liquids drenching my dick and then the muscle spasms that inform my dick... she has cum.

I push her further, working in and out of her cunt, finding yet another orgasm announcing its arrival.

She whispers, *I'm ready Roland. Give it, give it.*

I kiss her again as I drive in and deposit the cum she desires. I want to feel her response on my lips as she feels it in her cunt. I get exactly what I want as the knowledge hits her. Her hands grab my head and smash my face into her as she sends her tongue as deep as it can possibly go into my mouth and wails at the same time.

We stay frozen in the position for a bit, breathing and taking in what has transpired tonight.

I kiss her forehead. She bites my earlobe. She pushes her hips up toward and against my hips. I am still marginally inside her but have wilted.

She giggles. *I want your nose. Give it me!* And she giggles again.

You have it.

I know.

You know, it is not sex all the time.

Of course.

You will have to be good to the girls.

I promise, they like sisters to me.

Good. Tomorrow, after you come back following work, you take Jezryl and please her and her cunt as much as she can handle. I will be with Jecim tomorrow.

I not work tomorrow. I here all day.

Don't you need to go back to your sister's?

She giggles again. No. I tell her I living with you now.

You were that sure?

Yes. I was right! ... Roland, why no one here knows this jazz? It really good.

It's not good for karaoke.

Oh! Yes, this true.

Are you always so chatty after sex?

She giggles again. Maybe. We will see. Ask me next year!

Tell me, why were you sure you wanted to be with me? You only met me today.

I hear what happen to you. About Charline, I mean. I hear how you take Jezryl and send her to the clinic for testing. My aunt tell me that you give money to the girls to go to the market each day. My aunt say, other talk. They say that you help Jezryl. You good to her. I hear from Jecim's uncle Jomar that you are a very good man. I hear you are artist. A carver. I want to see this. I feel it good that you have art in your soul. And I hear how you with Zenny, and what you say to her... that there can never be just one woman now. And I say, yes, this the man I want. I not care of the others there. Better it be me and not someone else!

Gossip, it's an amazing thing. It can destroy you and it can make you a hero. To me, she was a fresh face I knew nothing about. To her, I was topic du jour. She self-selected based on her sense of what works for her.

Let's see how it goes between her and the girls.

Morning. I have gotten used to waking up alone. Not so this morning. Myra is awake, but not up. She is sitting on the bed, looking at me.

Decide you make a mistake last night?

Hub? No! Silly, No! I like this room, Roland. I like the house. I like the girls. They love you, I think. There is peace here. Why someone bad like your wife? Why she not want this? This good, I think.

I cannot tell you what is in someone's heart. I am not sure that anyone ever really knows what is in their own heart. I don't know why Charline did what she did. But she will have to live with the results of her decision, as will I. In the sum of things, maybe Charline did me a favor by leaving me. Only time will tell.

But you already have two girls who love you now. That is better, yes?

How do you know they love me?

I do.

Charline and I have been married for many years. She always said she loved me. Did she?

Oh. You don't think they love you?

I don't think they, or anyone, really loves anyone.

You don't love?

How can I know? I know I like it that Jecim and Jezryl are here. I do not want them to leave. Is that love, or is it emotional need? I am fond of you, but I have not known you for even twenty-four hours yet. You think I am a good person to be with, but what do you call the feelings? Jezryl was selling her body for rice. She does not have to do that by living here. Here she is safe and if she didn't want to have sex, she would not be required. So this is a good place for her. Does that mean she loves me?

Maybe you feel different later. Your wife just leave you this year. Maybe it take time.

Maybe.

What happen today?

You can figure out how you want to use your time here, by talking with the girls, or decide on your own. Today, after breakfast, I will go back to my carving until evening.

Oh! OK.

I can't be responsible for her life. That is her issue and not mine. I shower, dress and go down to the breakfast table. Myra has not descended yet. I don't get far into my meal when I have a girl on either side of me.

If they are expecting me to speak, they will be disappointed.

Jecim breaks the silence. *Roland, Jezryl thinks she is good and will stay. I say nothing. Roland? You listening?*

Yes.

What you think?

I think she wants to join you two.

See? That is Jezryl. The question is directed to Jecim, not me. I told you, she likes us. She just wants to be here too.

Roland, is what Jezryl say, true?

It seems right. It is up to the two of you to decide. She's OK for me, I think, but only if she is OK for you two.

Here I wish I had a photo of what happens, because Jezryl basically slaps Jecim before announcing, *I told you! He loves you! He not going to hurt you! He say, you not the only one. He not say, you not important, only that you not the only one.*

Is Jezryl right?

I told you that the two of you need to decide if you are OK with her. If she does stay, tonight she will be with you, Jezryl. Jecim, tonight you will be with me.

What if she doesn't stay?

Jecim, you are with me tonight. It does not matter whether Myra stays or goes.

From behind me, *What doesn't matter?*

Myra, I was telling this fearful one, that regardless of what happens with you, she is to be with me tonight.

Myra seems a little amused. *Sister, why do you think he doesn't want you?*

Because he was with you last night! That why.

I do not think you know this man's heart. You, both of you, have it. I want to have it, but I not have, not yet. If I have it later, it will be the three of us. I want that. Jezryl, you do me good last night. Maybe I do you good tonight. OK?

Myra gets eyebrows up and down as an affirmation.

Jecim, help me bring my stuff here? Maybe we can talk while we do this?

Jezryl laughs. I look at her. I fail to see the humor. Jezryl, shakes her head, and tells me, *Remember when she called you, 'Stupid?'*

I nod.

Well, you don't get it, again! Myra knows I am OK with her. She knows Jecim is frightened. She will spend the time today making sure the two of them become good friends for one simple reason. She knows she doesn't get to stay unless Jecim is OK with her. She knows it, you know it, I know it... Jecim doesn't know it!

Jecim looks at me. And the only thing I can think to say is, *Yes, you are that powerful and that important.*

And that causes the girl to start bawling. I swear to God, females are weird.

By the time I get back on the terrace and pick her up from the soft cloth, the girl in the wood is howling and cussing. Where have I been for so long? Females!

It is very slow going now, I am so close to her that every application of the knife is fraught with imminent danger. I whisper to her, *Patience, patience. I am releasing you. It will happen. Patience, please.*

I work through the morning and force myself to get up for a brief bite at lunch time, hurrying back to the work. I can see her now.

There are still parts and pieces adhering to her that need removing, but she is here now.

Still as the light dims again, it is not near complete. I put her down on the cloth only to notice that I have an audience.

How long have you been standing here?

About an hour I guess. She is wonderful. Who is she?

Myra, she is herself. She is of the wood and of nothing else.

Who did you model her from?

There was no model. I simply found her waiting for me in there and I let her out.

You make it sound magical. How there something there that need to be found?

How that?

I don't know. It just is the way it is. How are things with you and Jecim?

Yes, Jecim.... We need to talk.

Problem?

Not for me. Why you not take her? You hurt her heart!

Ah. I see. I will fix that tonight.

See, after you have me. That wrong. Why you not take her first?

You can think it is wrong, but this is my home, my world, and my decision.

You know her heart hurts? She is in love with you!

Myra, how long is this conversation going to go on? You know what I feel about nonsense regarding claims of love.

You wrong. Don't hurt her any more.

So says the older sister, protecting her younger sister.

Yes!

Well knock it off. Go eat some cunt if you have nothing else to do.

Yes, that did it. I think I got her attention. She has left the terrace and, I think, feels appropriately spanked.

Supper happens without any more incidents. The girls, now three of them are all here but not a word is said. If I have stepped on some toes, then so be it. I may be a good guy in some ways, but they don't run this place and there are limits to what I will accept. I am not married to her and this is very much part of that. I get to my easy chair, my brandy, jazz, a book, and relaxation.

The girls are not around.

At nine I put the book down. The brandy is long gone. I turn the music off. Up in my room, there is no sign of Jecim. I go down to the room she shares with Jezryl, knocking before opening the door. The room is empty.

I take my cell phone from my pocket and tap out a text to her.

Where r u?

No answer. I send a next message to Jezryl, *where is Jecim?*

The message comes back. *She go back to her mother.*

I am pissed. I text back. *Then I suggest you and Myra follow her. Leave now.*

What?

Go.

Why?

Why did she go?

You don't love her.

Myra tell her that, right? Myra scare her and you didn't stop it. Go. Both of you.

Wait I get her back.

Too late. Go.

OK.

I go up to my bed and go to sleep.

Take 5

The morning comes and, in a way, I am back where I was the morning after Charline left. Well I guess I need to get used to it.

Showered and dressed I descend the stairs and head to the kitchen to prepare my breakfast and brew my coffee only to find it is all ready for me.

I look around and see no one. I look further and find Jecim on the terrace texting.

Why are you here? You left me last night.

My mother and uncle tell me I am stupid. They tell me to return. Where is Jezryl?

I kicked her and Myra out when I found that you left and they didn't stop you or call me. They are gone and so, child, are you. Leave.

I am sorry. I make a mistake.

Yes you did. Leave.

Why?

What did Charline do?

Leave?

Yes. What did you do?

Leave?

Yes, and I have had it with girls who leave.

But I come back.

You came back because others tell you that you are stupid. Maybe Charline will try to come back if she runs out of money. I am not interested in girls who leave.

I leave her on the terrace and go back inside. I don't think I had connected with my feelings of abandonment by Charline, as I just

realized out there on the terrace. I am not hungry and even the coffee no longer seems inviting. My stomach is messed up. I collapse in an easy chair.

In a moment I go from angry, to emotionally exhausted. I am not thinking, I am just staring at a spot on the wall. How long? I feel used up. I don't trust anyone, anything. I am messed up. How long have I been sitting here?

I notice movement. Jecim is standing there.

I told you to leave.

I know.

Then why are you still here?

This is where I live, with you.

And you think you can just decide that?

You going to pick me up, and throw me out?

No.

Then yes. I just decide that. I decide that Jezryl lives here too. I tell her to come back.

And is she here?

No. She is afraid. She say she not come back unless you ask. Here, call her. She holds her phone out toward me. Tell her, come back.

No.

Why? She not leave you. I do it.

She was here because you protected her. What did she do when you decided to leave? Nothing. Not a damned thing.

We both make mistakes. We not make that mistake again. You make a mistake now. She be good. Tell her to come back. Here, use my phone.

OK. Maybe you are right. Call her yourself. If you get her on the phone I will tell her to come back.

She gets the girl on the phone and sticks it to my ear. I say, *Come*. That is all I say. It is evidently enough.

Come have your breakfast.

No. I am not hungry. Just leave me be. I close my eyes. As much as she wants to be my company, I feel completely alone. Having others here will not change that feeling.

I go back upstairs to my room. She, of the wood, will have to wait. I have no desire to do anything. I feel empty, hollow, and isolated. All around me are facsimiles. 'Care for' is only 'need of'. Love is only fear. All is false. The only thing true is the wood. I am too hollow inside to honor it.

My head hurts, I take two aspirin and lie down.

A knock on the door startles me. It is dark outside. My clock tells me it is six-thirty. I get up and open the door. Jecim is there.

Roland, you not eat all day. Please come and eat. I make mashed potatoes and gravy for you. Please come.

I agree, and wash my face before coming downstairs. There at the table are Jecim, Jezryl... and Myra.

I know why Jecim is here. ... I know why Jezryl is here. ... Why, the fuck, are you here Myra?

I... I thought... Jezryl said... I sorry, I go!

Stop! That is Jecim. Roland, Stop it!

Why?

Wait five days. Ask then. You need to stop hurting. It take time. Don't punish because you are hurt. I know I leave, just like Charline leave. I wrong. Myra not know you. She wrong. Maybe she very wrong, but she learn! I promise it. Jezryl, she afraid and not know what she must do last night. She know now. She will beat down wall to find you. She promise this. Wait, I know you hurt inside. Wait.

I don't say anything, but I take a seat. Myra doesn't know if she should sit or leave. She is still half out of her chair. Jezryl pulls her

down into the chair. She turns to Myra, and informs the older girl, that regardless of what she thinks, I have accepted Jecim's request. They are all staying.

The mashed potatoes and gravy tastes good. The smooth warmth feels comforting as I take it into my mouth. These are sensations I have known from childhood. They are connections that speak of safety to me. In this land of rice, the potatoes transport me back, back to an earlier life. I relax a bit. Jezryl turns on the music. I relax a bit more.

After supper I take my brandy and retire to the easy chair. I close my eyes and just drift with the music.

There are hands on me. I am not looking. My eyes are still closed. But my sandals are being removed. Someone is massaging my shoulders and someone is massaging my scalp.

It feels good. I seem to want to hold on to anger, but the girls are, with their hands, pushing the anger away, denying it a place to stay. Their hands are talking to my body and bypassing my brain. It is hard to stay angry, when the body feels good.

I think that is why when you try to comfort folks physically, they will push you away. To stay angry, you have to deny touch. This team of three has overwhelmed the wall I had in place. I don't think it will take 5 days now. The anger dissipates with the continued administration of touch.

I still have the brandy in my hand. Eyes closed, I bring it to my lips and allow some to slide down my esophagus as hands continue to pursue my epidermis. I am warmed inside and out, chasing the blues away.

The brandy is no more and the glass is removed from my grasp. Hands urge me up. Opening my eyes, all three are participating one on each shoulder and arm. Jecim grabbing my hands, urging me up and forward. Forward to her. Forward to the stairs. Forward.

No words are spoken. No offerings made. No excuses, no promises. Just movement. Just touch. A soft touch. A warm touch.

A gentle but firm touch, guiding me up the stairs and to my bedroom.

I have been here so many times. With Charline, without Charline. At peace with the world and isolated from all within it. In control of my world and in control of nothing at all.

What am I now? Jecim looks at me. She needs direction. She has succeeded in getting here with me. But now what? How does all this move forth?

She disrobes. I haven't asked her to do so. It's not a sexy thing. It is a matter of fact removal of garments, placed in a hamper, one after another. I am just standing there. Not gawking, not looking away, just standing.

She comes to me and removes my clothing as she might her child, or a sibling. It is an act of caring and not impending activities. It is without desire.

She takes my hand and leads me to the bed. I get on and slide under the covers. I will sleep. So apparently will she.

We are together in the bed. I am alone in the bed.

She holds my arm in her hands. She rests her head on my shoulder. She says nothing.

Maybe it will take five days. Maybe.

Sleep comes.

Morning.

I am alone.

I shower, dress, and descend the stairs. The house is quiet, but a breakfast is set out for me. The coffee is made, warm and waiting.

I eat in my solitude and venture out to she, of the wood, who has waited patiently for my return.

I pick her up. She is real, she is what she is. There is no artifice, no hidden truths. She is not a facsimile. She may not be all, but what she is can be trusted, believed, and valued.

I remove my knife from the pocket where it rests when not in service. The blade is ready and I employ it gently, slowly, and with care. As each little bit is removed, she sighs, she giggles. Maybe she thinks, *'I wonder if he will see that! Oh good, that needed to go! Ha! See, I'm not fat! Careful, now, shave me, don't cut me.'* I think back to her, *'Yes I know dear, I know.'*

And thereby we proceed through the long morning, she and I, in quiet conversation, collaboration, the wood and I.

Roland?

Hub?

Roland, it one in the afternoon. I call you to come for lunch an hour ago. You not want to eat?

I see. I guess I didn't hear you, Jecim. Yes, OK, I'm coming.

Your carving. Roland, it beautiful.

Yes, she is.

What you mean 'she?' You make this. It not a person you meet and say, you are gwapa. You make beauty.

I don't know. I didn't make her, she was always there. I only found her.

Are you buang?²¹

Maybe... maybe.

Come eat, now.

OK. Where is everyone?

Myra go to work. I send Jezryl to Tacloban by van. She get you the wine you like. She will return tomorrow.

²¹ Crazy?

She can't buy the wine. She isn't eighteen.

Roland, sometimes you are stupid. She will get it. Relax.

Where will she stay tonight?

She has a cousin who live there. She stay with the cousin. I tell her to buy the wine tomorrow just before she return. That way it get here better.

Yes, good.

You sleep OK, last night?

Yes, why?

You talk in your sleep. You know this?

No. I have never been told I do.

I ask Myra and Jezryl, they not hear it, but I hear it.

What did I say?

You keep on saying, something like, 'all fuck up.' I not sure.

That's all?

Yes. That it.

Jeez, I wonder what I really said. I don't believe her for a moment. She just doesn't want to tell me.

By four in the afternoon there is not a single piece of wood needing to be removed. It is time for the sanding and oiling. But I will start on that in the morning. I place my knife in its pocket, she of the wood, on her soft cloth, and I sweep up the terrace from the day's activities before I re-enter the house by myself to clean up.

At four-thirty, there is a knock on my bedroom door.

I could have called out to come in, but I go to the door and open it. There, completely naked, is Jecim. She enters, closes the door, and pushes me toward my bed, before removing the clothing I have just put on.

I stand naked in front of the girl. She pushes me back onto my bed, climbs over me, before speaking.

Roland, find the beauty in me like you find it in the wood. Make me beautiful with your hands and heart, like you make the wood beautiful. I know it in you to do this. Please do this for me?

God, of all the things that girl might have said, how... for the love of God, how did that come from her? What ethereal spirit whispered in her ear to elicit that? I swear, it is she of the wood, come alive, in Jecim, that I hear in my ears.

It is to 'she of the wood' that I respond. I take the girl in my arms and lay her down on the bed. I kiss her forehead, her ears, her neck, her shoulders and arms. I return higher and take a breast in my mouth, sucking a nipple, flicking it with my tongue. My mouth glides down over her belly, taking brief stops to kiss and nibble on the way to her pussy.

Her pussy is warm and inviting, rising up to greet me, as I greet it. My tongue, as it slides between her lower lips, surprises her, but after the surprise, she welcomes it and me.

I kiss the inside of her thighs before moving up to find her lips. Her sixteen-year-old lips. Lips that want to be kissed. Tongues that finally meet, after such a prolonged courtship. At first, just touching, before committing to a comingling.

My fingers play with her pussy and her clit. She is beginning to breathe hard. I move on her, encouraging the mounting need, bringing her desire to peak after peak. Neither cruel, nor dilatory, I work her body as I worked the wood, knowing each little place that needs attention, with the smallest of details not to be overlooked or given short shrift.

I keep her going. Her eyes are fixed on me. They do not leave me. She is grasping on to me. I mount her. She is wet, very wet.

I believe she is a virgin, but I surely do not know. I plunge in, without warning, or caution. She gasps.

I withdraw and push in again. And again. She is still looking at me. She gives me two serious eyebrows. I am to continue. I do.

Her mouth is open, her eyes stare. Her fingers have a death grip on my shoulders. Her legs lock around my back and I start a hard, insistent fucking.

In the silent house, the only sound is that which we are making and the creaking of the bed itself.

I feel everything about her. Her breath, the beating of her heart; the perspiration between our two bodies; the heat of her pussy; the grip of her hands on me; the back of her calves as they adhere to my legs; her lips as she lifts her head up to kiss me; her thick, rich black hair; the hard pebbles her nipples have become.

We are connected. We are moving as one. Her body talks to mine without word, without the forensics of proper grammar. It is far more basic and better communicated than anything she might say.

There is desire, passion, and the need for a completion. She doesn't have to say it. Her body announces it. My body receives the message and is preparing to answer her. She knows it. She gives me the eyebrows again. She is telling me she is ready now.

I not only see it in her face, I feel it down below. There is a demanding on my body that is unmistakable.

Her pussy begging, my nuts are tightening, and then delivering.

I fill her. She gasps. Her eyebrows again signaling approval of the completion, along with a smile that slowly engulfs her face.

Her hands leave my shoulders. They grab my head and pull me down for a kiss with a tongue that invades me, before she pulls back, looks at me again, smiles, closes her eyes and just pulls me into a hug as I slide out of her.

We stay that way for no more than five minutes before Jecim announces that we are a mess. We need to shower. She grabs me and pulls me into my bathroom.

I am going along with her needs and requests, but am half here in the world and half drifting.

When we reenter the bedroom, there is clear evidence of blood on the sheets. I am thinking, jeez, I am not sure I will be able to get the blood out. She is smiling and announces that these bloody sheets are a badge of honor and distinction she will keep forever.

I am taking that in, while she tosses me my clothing and she puts on my robe. She has no clothing. She will not leave the room without me. She pulls me along to her room, where she dresses.

She pulls me to the supper table. She puts a bowl of prepared fruit in front of me as she disappears into the kitchen to get me my supper.

Supper is half eaten when Myra walks in. She says nothing to me, but there is an unspoken conversation between the girls. I can see a sign of pride in Jecim and a sign of warmth in return from Myra.

Myra notices that there is no music playing and gets it going before returning to the table.

After dinner I move to my easy chair. Myra brings me my warmed brandy. Jecim is massaging my feet. The streaming jazz station plays a *Night in Tunisia* by Dizzy, before giving way to Holly Cole singing *Too Damned Hot*.

Myra is now massaging my shoulders.

I so wish I could feel love. I so wish I could feel this was more than it is. But in truth I know better. It is really just fear that if they aren't careful, I will throw them out again. They don't love me. They are afraid of what I might do next.

It leaves me sad, when maybe I should be happy. It leaves me feeling empty when I should be feeling loved and connected. It is having the opposite effect possibly, from their hoped for feelings. I can't blame them. It only makes sense, that they should want me to enjoy and be happy with the attention.

They are doing nothing wrong. It's just that it's not possible to be right.

Take the A Van

Jecim joins me in the bedroom again tonight. I don't ask her. She simply sees that I am leaving the easy chair, and gets next to me as I ascend the stairs. She doesn't ask. I don't challenge. We enter the bedroom. I can see she has brought some of her things here. She has been busy this evening.

She undresses me and urges me to take a shower. She tells me, she will follow with her shower, once I am done.

What is she trying to do? Is she trying to be 'the wife?' That can't be. I have nothing to push back against at the moment, but she is getting close to the edge.

I finish my shower and get into bed as she enters the bathroom. We had sex just a few hours ago. I don't expect a repeat now. The night stand light on the far side of the bed remains on. The lamp on my side is turned off.

I don't know when she gets into bed. I am already sleeping. At some point I am aware she is here with me. It matters not. There is nothing but sleep to be done now.

I think it is morning. I am not sure, as I have not opened my eyes, but I hear birds outside. Jecim is stroking my dick. She is being gentle about it, not insistent. I wonder what she is expecting. It feels good and there is the reality of a morning woody that is normally accompanied with a morning need to take a leak. I am not feeling that need right now, but suspect it is imminent.

I extend my arm and bring her in to me. The warmth of her body feels good against my old skin.

Her face finds a home against my neck, snuggled in between chin and chest.

Good morning, Roland.

Good morning, to you.

You are hard. You need?

No, it is just the way I wake up. No need.

You sure?

Yes, child, I am sure.

You like me?

That is a silly question.

No... I mean, it OK in bed yesterday?

You are fine. There is no complaint.

But not as good as Jezryl?

I have only fucked Jezryl as a man fucks a whore. You did not come to bed as a whore. I did not fuck you that way. It was fine. You did fine.

I not understand.

I am sorry but I cannot explain.

If Jezryl here now, you will do her?

Ah, no. It is not because of you that I say it is not the time now. It is time I got up and pissed.

Oh! OH! OK, I see. I am stupid.

No, you are not. You have just never been with a man like this before. You are learning.

If you are hard after you pee, we do it?

I won't be.

But if you are, we do it?

OK sure.

Good. Go pee, now. I wait.

I don't want to laugh in front of her, but it is funny. I am quite sure this is the very first time in my sixty-seven years that I have ever had this conversation. It says in Ecclesiastes 1:9 that there is

nothing new under the sun. Maybe, but this is, sure as hell, new to me.

I get up, and allow the bladder to empty. True to form, there is a limp dick when done. I return to the bedroom, displaying the evidence and ask, *do you want to shower first or will I?*

Come back to bed. I will make it hard.

I am not wanting sex with anyone at this moment. What I want is a cup of coffee. What I want is to go see my lady of the wood. Why does she want this? Does she think it makes her more secure here? It doesn't. Does she want to establish a special place in my world for her? It can't. Does she think that it is what I really want? Does she think that she needs to do better than last time, somehow? Is she really that into having sex, now that she has had it?

I will never know. There is no way of knowing. Does she even really know?

I get back onto the bed but am not sure why I am doing it other than I don't want to cause a problem by rejecting her. I don't have the energy for another mess.

On your back, Roland. Let me try.

She takes me in her hand and giggles. Bending down she kisses the side of my dick. Her warm hand, warm lips and warm breath feel good on the old guy.

She keeps at it. She is not going crazy on my dick, just pleasuring it. As she does so, after a few minutes, the old boy shows signs of life. Seeing it encourages Jecim. She now has hope of a full inflation and her hopes may well be realized. My desire for a cup of coffee is fading into the background as the pleasure flows through me.

My hips lift, answering her hand's offerings. I am stiffening and a need is rising in me. I want her to climb on and end this preview of things to come. Let them come now. My arm reaches out and urges her to mount me.

She does, sliding her hot, if not fully wet pussy over my hardened dick. She gets a little way on, pulls back and then lowers herself again, as she begins to lubricate.

Twice more she repeats the motion before she is all the way down over my dick and we are bone against bone. Once there she waits a bit before moving again. But now in a concerted fashion, the pumping on my dick begins in earnest.

Her breasts bouncing up and down as she goes. In the full light of the morning sun, she is a beautiful sight to behold. Her earnest expression breaking into a smile and then into a wonderment as an orgasm hits her. Her eyes flash wide and then close hard. Her thighs tighten as she rises up a bit and then they quiver.

The orgasm subsiding, she smashes down on me again and a large breath she was holding explodes out of her. She is pumping again, working herself back again towards another orgasm. My dick is the instrument, but not the objective. I am in a way, a bystander. Her need now is to achieve the feeling she had just before. How she got there is only a roadmap and nothing more.

Whatever reason she had to induce this tryst, her objective now is to cum and cum again.

She is very wet now. My loin is awash with her offerings. Once again I experience her body's quaking. But it is time for me. I roll her over. She is now on her back. I take control of her body. I hold her legs and pin them almost to her shoulders as I pound her hard into the soft mattress.

After two of her orgasms, her body is listening to its own logic and not to her mind. Her eyes just look up at me in subservient need. She will take what I am giving her, just please take her to completion.

I pound her hard, driving her through another orgasm before a fourth, as I fill her with my cum.

Below me, she smiles, giggles and announces, *Good, take your shower now.*

I descend the stairs to find coffee and fried rice waiting for me.
Myra is close by and I gather she is the one who took care of this.

Where Jecim? She still sleep?

No, she was in the shower when I left the bedroom.

You fuck her?

Nice mouth!

Well? You do it?

Why do you need to know?

When I get you again? When Jezryl? That why.

I see. You want to be with me and Jezryl tonight?

Both?

Why not?

OK, both. But who you fuck?

Both.

I not think you can.

Why?

You too old. Haha, it true!

I see. You are right. I can cum only once, but I can be in both of you, before I come.

OK, yes that true. So both?

Yes.

OK, I tell Jezryl, your plan. Jecim do OK?

None of your business, Myra.

OK I ask her, instead. She will tell me. No problem.

I see. So when I tell you it is none of your business, that doesn't matter to you?

*Ambut.*²²

And that about sums up a lot of what goes on. It matters little or not at all, what I want or think, so long as it does not interfere with their needs at the moment. I am a means to an end for them. They are the same for me, now. It has always been this way. I just didn't see it before Charline left me.

Following the meal, I settle down on the terrace with sandpaper and oil. I will sand her down, and then just before lunch I will coat her with oil. After lunch, I will sand her down again before drenching with oil, an oil bath, and putting her away for the night. Tomorrow I will see if she needs more sanding or just rubbing down. The grain is so tight on this wood that I don't think it will require a third sanding. She should be complete early tomorrow morning.

I wonder which block I should start on next. There are five chunks I cut from the large piece. I had not considered the matter until now. I was focused on 'her.' It was her voice that urged me on and let me know when I was getting close. It was her worry, when I might be getting too deep with my blade. She had a preference when it came to the angle of my blade. I could hear her scream at me if the angle was too great.

But now the blade sits shielded in its resting position deep within the pocket. There is no worry from her. But she is talking to me. She is urging me to take the block sitting closest to the wall as they sit on a table.

Why she wants me to take that block next is beyond me. But it is the one I will take. Ah, she is happy as the 220 grit paper moves over her back. After the first oil coat I will come back with a 400 grit paper. I will use such a fine grit as there will be no paint and no varnish to smooth her. The oil may raise the grain a bit, but I don't expect it to raise much at all. So the 220, then the oil, then the 400,

²² The key word of the phrase 'ambut sa imo' in Cebuano, essentially meaning, "I don't care," "It doesn't matter," "Why you ask me," or "Whatever"

then the oil bath, tonight followed by a cloth wipe-down in the morning.

I wonder what I will find waiting for me in the next block. She isn't telling.

Myra comes out to tell me that Jezryl may not be back until late tonight. The Velmar Bus going to Tacloban took a long time with many stops, and it will be the same coming back. Myra wants to know if I really want to wait to bed them until Jezryl returns.

There are two transport options. Call them A and B. The B is the Velmar bus and it makes many local stops along the way and waits for passengers at multiple points. Jezryl needs to take the A option, the express van. It is non-stop. It costs a bit more, two hundred pesos, but it is well worth it

Myra, why is she riding that one? Does she have enough money left for a van?

Wait I will check.

I continue with the sandpaper as texting ensues.

Yes but it is mahal²³.

I don't care. Tell her to get that one.

OK, OK.

Good. Anything else?

Dili... I... dili.

What is it, Myra?

Maybe you choose Jecim?

What do you mean?

To be your mistress.

Did Jecim say that?

²³ Expensive. [Literally means 'dear' and can mean the price is a dear one (expensive) or can be an affectionate term for a 'dear person']

No! She say it not possible. I know you tell Zenny same thing. Maybe you change your mind?

Jecim is right. The answer is no, and it will always be, no. You and Jezryl tonight. Are we clear?

Oo²⁴.

Good. ... Myra, do you really want to be here?

Why you ask?

Twice you have read me wrong. The first time created a mess. This time, at least you asked. But you have doubted what I said to all. Maybe this is not for you.

I sorry. You very different. You not sex crazy. Sometime I think you not even want it. But you do it. Jecim say she the one make it happen. She make it happen twice. That true?

Yes.

So why you want more?

You mean why do I want more than one companion?

Yes.

Then no one thinks she controls me. No one thinks she runs things. I had that before. I am still married to that person. Never again. You are here, but you are not my one and only partner. No one will ever be again.

What if you divorced?

Are you crazy? It isn't possible! Look, there are a number of answers to that. Yes I could get a divorce in the USA but it would not be legal here. She owns the land here. I would have to go to the USA and do that. Then she would have to come back and file for the annulment. ... But, as I wasn't the one who left the marriage, and abandonment isn't grounds for annulment anyway, it is beyond doubtful the annulment would be granted here. Even if there were grounds, and the annulment was granted, I would lose everything here. She owns the land and the house. It is not legal for me to own property here. So she will get all of it. For that reason I would need to challenge the annulment even if she

²⁴ Yes.

could file for it, which she can't! So long as we are married, I can live here without a problem. If there was an annulment, I would have a very big problem. So like I said, it's not possible.

You live here long time. Why you not citizen?

Your country has a process to allow me to file for citizenship, but in reality it really does not honor the process. While many are eligible, few succeed even if they do everything right. Maybe if I was Asian, they would allow it. I have heard Chinese get citizenship, but white guys mostly do not.

That wrong!

Yes it is wrong, and so what. It is the way things are. I can't change it.

But she is bad. She leave you!

Yes and she was able to do it knowing that there was nothing I could do about it. It is one of the reasons she conned me and left me.

Now you angry with all Filipina?

No. I am not angry. I am just making sure that I never get treated that way again.

You happy to live with three?

Yes.

Forever?

For as long as I live. Forever is not an option.

That forever.

OK. Then yes, forever.

I can stay forever as a wife?

No one is a wife.

Do not be difficult. We live here as partners for you forever?

Yes.

I can still work?

Yes.

I keep my money?

Yes.

I not support you?

Correct.

OK. I want to stay. This best.

No more problems please.

OK, no more.

Good.

What Myra investigated in this Q and A, is the very example of what is called enlightened self-interest. She has made a bargain. It is not perfect for her, but it is attainable and covers all her bases. The perfect may not be attainable. So seeing the cards she has to play, she has bet on what she hopes is a sure thing. It is a bet. I might be lying. That she cannot know. But I have been here a long time. The land and the house are here. Stability, in many ways, surrounds her. I am the cause of that stability and she is betting on being part of that.

The bet is probably a good one, so long as she does not try to rock the boat again. I suspect she won't. I am not a betting man, but I think the boat rocking is over.

Lunch approaches soon. I put the sandpaper down and put 'she of the wood' on a small pedestal that sits inside a large flat bottomed shallow bowl. Taking small brushes, I apply the oil to her in liberal fashion. She glistens. She is really something. I wait five minutes to see if a second covering is needed. It is not. The wood does not appear to be absorbing much at all.

I wrap the brushes, and put the oil away. It is time to wash my hands and get ready for lunch.

The afternoon follows much as I have planned. The oil has not absorbed. I wipe her down. I guess I could leave her as is, but I go over her with the 400 grit, wipe her again and give her the oil bath.

Taking the rest of the afternoon off from the work with the wood, I decide to make scalloped potatoes. We have some ham left over. I have some potatoes, onions, flour, butter, cheddar cheese, and milk. That's all I need. Myra and Jecim watch as I get the ingredients out. Watching as I start each task, they ask if they can complete each thing. With six hands, it doesn't take long at all. The fact that this kitchen has an oven makes it very different than the average Filipino home. It's not that ovens are not possible. They are, but most homes simply are not so equipped.

I have Jecim text Jezryl to find out where she is and hopefully discover when she will return, only to find out that she is in a tricycle on the way from the bus terminal to the house right now.

These gals have never eaten anything like scalloped potatoes in their lives. I told them there is no rice on the table tonight. That caused a minor uproar. When we had the mashed potatoes, I had not put my foot down on the matter of rice. But it just isn't needed.

My dear mother would have demanded a vegetable on the table. I have not provided one. We have plenty of vegetable only meals here, and some that are just rotisserie chicken and rice. So this is no better or worse that way.

All my girls like beer and so each gets one, and a helping of the dish we made. The result is just funny. They love it. They take heaping seconds once they realize that it is edible. Yup, we have a winner. Now, if the girls can waddle up the stairs in a couple of hours, all will be OK.

A quiet life, or an approximation there of

Brandy and jazz. It is a perfect combination. I am relaxed. Jezryl has brought home a case of wine, five of one and seven of the other. I gather she just about wiped out the store's stock of the Moscoto and she did wipe out all the Riesling. Jecim knew how much money would be needed and had supplied Jezryl with sufficient funds out of my wallet. Lucky me. My wallet is now the in-house ATM.

If it were for me alone, my wine selection would be drier and loaded with reds. But until recently, I have shared wine with my wife, and she, like all Filipinas I know, prefers sweet wines.

Many prefer the deep red Mogen David wine that I gather are kosher wines. I just can't handle that much sweetness and steered Charline to these two whites. She was OK with it and I figured it was a compromise I could live with. Now with these three, that compromise is set in stone once again.

The wine is not as expensive per bottle as is the brandy, but my brandy lasts for far more days before it's gone.

And yes the brandy I prefer is pricey. I could buy far less expensive stuff, but the taste just doesn't compare.

It's my vice. There are far more dangerous vices in this world. Until Jecim and Jezryl entered my bed, the vice of young girls was not one I entertained. I saw no value in the risk that it brought with it. I assumed, evidently wrongly, that there would be no way to live with such a young one in a manner than made any sense. What would we have in common?

But the fact is I probably didn't have much in common with Charline, who is older, and I had even less in common with her mother and father, who are even closer to my age.

The worlds that nurtured us were so radically different, as to deny any significant common ground based on age. The odd thing is that I may have more common ground with the younger ones in some

ways, just based on understanding of technology and international cultural happenings. They have been exposed to more outside influences than have the older generations.

Still, as much as they tolerate my jazz, I suspect it is a taste that they have not fully acquired.

I am drifting off to something new, a recording by Ahmad Jamal, *Poinciana* from the Blue Moon release. It is a perfect piece for me at this moment. My eyes are closed. I am flowing along with the snare and piano as I feel a tap on my arm. Myra hands me my cellphone. There is a text message from Jomar.

Rumor your wife is in trouble in the USA. There talk she asking for money to return. She not have money and lose her BF when he find out that she not have your money.

I text back.

What should I do? What are my rights?

His answer is less than helpful, as he answers,

It best she not return.

I agree, but what can I do?

We will wait. I will talk to her family and say, don't send the money. Maybe she not come. If she do, we will do something.

That this is not good news is simply to speak the truth. I never want to see her again. There is no way that I want her back in my life. It may be not that long since she left, but the damage is done. I was just a conveyance for her to get from A to B and once she got to B, she got off the bus. I gather that her plan has failed and she might want to go back to A. That is no good. It's not good, even if she didn't want to find a new B once she got back, there is no way I want to see her, let alone touch her ever again. Let her live with that, for a very long time.

Her coming back will cause me a number of problems. She owns the house. She has every right to enter it. Maybe I can get a restraining order, but I doubt it. It could be a major fucking mess.

A mess I don't need. And then there is the issue of the two underage girls. Myra is a complication, but she is not underage.

Trouble Rolie?

Not yet. Maybe in the future, but no, not now.

That was Jecim's uncle?

Yes.

He your friend?

Yes.

Good. It good to have a PNP officer be a friend. He approve Jecim be here?

Yes, he recommended it.

Good. Then it will be OK.

From your mouth to God's ear, Myra.

What?

Just a saying I learned as a child.

Say it again, please.

From your mouth to God's ear.

As in, may it be so?

Yes, I guess.

I don't think our Padre would approve of how you say it. Even if you mean it in a good way.

Then your padre needs to lighten up. Besides, what would your padre say about you living here, or what will happen tonight?

She giggles. I not tell him! Best that way!

And in that, I am very sure she speaks the truth.

The question doesn't arise on either of these two girls' minds whether I have a clue of how to be with two females at one time.

They might do well to ask. I have not an iota of an idea. The reason I suggested it, is because I don't want jockeying for who gets in my bed and therefore is first in my heart. If I put two of them in the same room, at the same time, I take that concept and essentially shred it. They will succeed or fail as a team of two.

And that, given how I feel about them and our relative positions in the world, is a pretty good match. They are here because it is their self-interest. It is possibly in Charline's self-interest to see if she can return to me. She can't, at least not willingly on my part, but that is the way of the world. I have the blinders off now. There is no putting them back on.

I have no idea as to what is to happen tonight. Myra appears to be in the same position, but Jezryl suffers no such impediment. It seems that this is not a new field she will plow.

Before we came upstairs, Jecim came to me, with the other two in attendance, put her arms around me and wished me a very good night with my two companions before giving me a good kiss, a squeeze on the family jewels, followed by a sexy exit into the downstairs bedroom.

Now up in my bedroom, Jezryl has taken control, suggesting I sit on the bed and enjoy the show for a while. And a show it is. She whispers in Myra's ear, who seems to accept the instruction. Jezryl then slowly circles around Myra, with one hand touching hips, belly, hips, and back. Once again, this time the hand is higher, as it caresses breasts as it passes. Again, a third time, now very slowly as Myra's stretchy blouse is lifted up and finally removed.

Myra is facing me. Jezryl is behind her. Jezryl's hands extend around Myra, sliding her hands under the stretchy leggings and slowly, oh so slowly, pulling them down as Myra sways her hips in a circular manner and sucks on her own fingers. Myra steps out of the leggings that are now on the floor.

Jezryl rises slowly, her hands caressing calves, thighs, hips, and belly, before squeezing the cups of Myra's bra and her breasts there within. Jezryl kisses Myra's cheek, before withdrawing her right

hand. It goes to Myra's back and unhooks the bra, her left hand holding the bra in its place.

Now both hands cup Myra's breasts underneath the cups and the bra drops to the floor. Jezryl squeezes and plays with her captive's breasts. Myra is clearly enjoying the attention as she pushes her ass back against Jezryl.

Jezryl has each nipple between fingers, torturing them in a manner. It is far more aggressive, than I have ever been with a woman's breasts. Myra is responding, but Jezryl is not done. She pulls the small almost thong like panty covering Myra's pussy to the side of the girl's labia and attacks the clit.

Myra cusses and bucks hard. The attack is not short lived and Myra is cussing up a storm as she is mauled.

Finally, Jezryl stops, and drags Myra to the bed, pushes her onto hand and knees as she instructs me to disrobe and fuck the girl in this position.

Seeing no reason to argue, I get with the program and mount Myra, who only cries out a little as I ram in hard.

Jezryl makes short work of stripping down and gets higher on the bed, her back on the headboard and her cunt right below Myra's face. She pulls the girl's face down to her cunt and I hear the instruction given. *Eat me. Make me happy and I bring you back with me next time!*

Myra dives into Jezryl's cunt. I am fucking Myra and looking right at Jezryl, who is looking right at me. She has a big smile on her face. She is licking her lips and bucking her hips. The feeling is good but I signal to Jezryl that I want to mount Myra from the front. She smiles and mouth's, without speaking, *no problem.*

I back out and Jezryl backs off. I turn Myra over and mount her again. She seems to be more than happy with the switch. Jezryl moves and has me pull Myra's legs up with her ass a bit elevated off the bed. She climbs over, straddles Myra's head and lowers her cunt onto Myra's face. She wiggles her cunt all over the lower girl's face,

anointing Myra with fluid on cheeks, nose, chin and forehead before Myra takes control of Jezryl's hips and goes to work on her bedmate's cunt.

Jezryl leans towards me, grabbing both me and Myra's legs, and brings me in for a prolonged spit swapping kiss that continues to last as I fuck away.

Jezryl whispers in my ear. *Cum in her tonight. Cum in me in the morning. We not leaving. Do it. No using the condoms you bought. You waste money.* She giggles and then gasps as I gather Myra must have done something very right, down below.

I am 67. I have no business creating babies. I was testing their desire to stay before. I no longer need to test and while the fantasy of getting them pregnant remains, the sanity of doing so eludes me.

Myra has had her attention split between me and Jezryl but Jezryl backs off as I continue pounding Myra. Jezryl is kissing Myra. Myra is cumming hard, bucking hard. She screams at me. *Do it! Please! Do it!*

I do, and God as my witness, it feels like I am emptying my loins fully into her. It is almost painful. I am spent.

Myra is on one side and Jezryl is on the other. Both want to snuggle. It's a bit on the warm and sweaty side for me. I am happy to be with them, but they need to give me a little space.

The giving of the space evidently ends the silence and triggers a need to talk. This is a side effect that I had not prepared for, as my mind is pretty well fried and my body is done in for the night.

Myra is the older one, but Jezryl seems to be more in her own element and it is she who breaks the sweet silence.

Rolie, you know about Filipino families?

What about them? What are you trying to tell me?

You know how we like to see each other, to be close?

Sure.

You know how if there is more room there, and not as much here, we move around to where there is more room?

I think I understand what she is asking and I am not going to like where this is going, if I am right. What's your point Jezryl? You didn't have a family unit at all before. There was no one there. That was why you were selling sex.

I have a sister. She lives with neighbors who lived next to us before my parents die.

How old is she?

She fourteen.

And you want her to live here?

Yes.

I am sorry Jezryl, but it is dangerous enough for me that you live here. I can't take in a younger girl. It is not safe for me.

Why?

You know why. Don't be foolish.

I take care of her. She not be a problem.

That is not what I mean and you know it.

I not know. Why?

Damnit Jezryl there is no parent for the child in this home. It will look like she is here for sex.

So? Why that matter?

Myra, can you explain it to your friend?

Roland, I know why you say this, and maybe it true other times. This different. All know Jezryl the only family the girl have. They know she unable to take her sister until now. They know she able to take her sister now because she lucky to live here. No one think it wrong if she here. And Roland?

Yes?

It not a problem that Jezryl live here. It known she sell sex and that you take her in and protect her. No one complain that. No problem. No one think you take her virginity. It OK for her to be here.

Myra are you going to ask to include family members here too?

She smiles, sticks out her tongue, before answering, No, silly. No need. I am youngest. No need. But Roland, maybe they can visit me here? Come for supper sometimes? My mother too?

Really? Your mother wants to come to this house where you live as one of three mistresses?

Why not?

OK, OK, Yes to your request Myra. Jezryl, I am not sure about your request. I will talk to Jomar about it and see what he thinks.

Jomar will agree. It will be OK.

We will see.

Text him.

I will, tomorrow.

Do it now.

It is too late.

It not. Do it now.

Tomorrow, Jezryl.

But she is closer to the nightstand where my cellphone sits. She grabs it, rifles through my contacts until she finds Jomar and taps out something in Cebuano.

The next thing I know, the phone rings. Jezryl is still holding it. She accepts the call and speaks. The conversation goes on for a while and I have no idea as to what is being said. Myra, possibly sensing my irritation, rubs my back a bit.

Eventually, Jezryl hands the phone to me. Jomar wants to speak with me.

Roland, it OK. The girl can be with you. No one will question this. It is right for the younger one to be with her older sister. Do not worry. It not a problem for you.

Thank you for the advice Jomar. I am sorry we bothered you so late at night.

You are welcome. My niece say you are a very good man, just like we hear. We are very lucky. Do not worry about Charline. I go to her family tonight. I warn them to not allow her to return.

You can really do that?

Yes, why not?

I see. Thank you again, for all your help. Good night, Jomar.

Yes, yes, OK, good night.

I look at Jezryl. I don't know what to think. Evidently her sister is to be added to the household. That much is clear. That I don't really want this is irrelevant. It is to be in conformance with cultural expectations. To not do it might well raise more issues than doing it.

A question forms in my weary brain. *Jezryl, are you going to keep your sister safe and pure, or are you going to put her in my bed?*

What you want?

Oh, good God. Really? *I want to sleep.*

Morning. Morning brings no clarity to the discussion that never really ended last night. Myra is long gone. She has to be at work this morning and the pharmacy opens at seven.

Jezryl, however, is still here as I rise to piss and shower. She gets up too and starts to follow me into the bathroom.

Jezryl, can you wait please, at least until I am done peeing?

I will help you. A big grin spreads across her face. A confused look crosses mine. She grabs my hand, leads me to the toilet bowl, lifts the lid and seat, holds my dick so as to aim it and informs me to let it rip.

I have never in all my years ever encountered, envisioned, or ever heard of such a thing. How can you take a leak when some little beauty has her hands on your dick? I freeze. But I do need to piss and eventually the muscles relax and a yellow stream arcs into the bowl below.

When I complete, she shakes my dick vigorously before wiping the tip with a bit of toilet paper. I think we are done and I am moving to take my shower when she starts pulling me back to the bedroom.

We fuck first, then you shower!

I am not in the mood, but I suspect she can get me there. Last night, she said she wanted me to give her cum this morning. Does she feel sexy at all? Is she horny, or is this a 'job' for her; something she does as she thinks it is needed?

We are back on the bed and the fact that I have just taken a piss doesn't seem to slow her down a bit as she starts giving me head. Is she good at it? Hell yes, she is.

It doesn't take long for this teenager to get me rigid and ready to go. That being all she wanted from the activity, she pulls me on top of her and seeks my entry into her cunt.

Who am I to refuse the offer? I plunge in to a hot and damp pussy. It feels beyond good. It feels like I was a fool for not understanding how much I should be wanting this. She is smiling up at me. She knows I am more than happy to be inside her.

I am not close to cumming, but that just doesn't matter. This feels so good. She feels so good. She is pretty and so young. I feel every movement of her muscles. I feel her lubricating, her tensing and her orgasms as they roll through her body and around my dick.

She knows I want her. She sees it in my eyes. She feels it in my actions. And finally she feels it in the hot cum that fills her cunt.

Visitation

The new block of wood is in my hands. I am not sure what I will find within. All I touch calls me to remove it. None of it will be part of the result. I get about the task of removing the husk from that which resides patiently within.

The beginning is tedious. I do not know what I am looking for. I just cut away. It is simple whittling and uses little of my conscious attention that the later work will require. The rewards are far off as the mindless work continues. Jezryl hovers just inside the door. I can feel her more than hear her.

Come out here and talk to me. I have time.

She emerges from the shadows and stands stock still.

Good lord, Jezryl, relax, sit by me, and tell me, what is troubling you?

She does, sort of, but relaxed she isn't.

What is it, girl?

My sister! You never say OK. You not give your permission.

I don't know the girl. She will just show up and she is here? What if I think she's a real problem?

She not. She no problem. I promise. You will like her. She be good.

Maybe she will not like it here.

She will like it. No problem that.

Does she go to school?

Yes, of course. She sophomore at Naval National High School.

She a behavior problem? Jezryl, you must tell me the truth.

She not. It true. She not problem.

Why do the people she is staying with want her to go?

What? They not! They happy with her. I want her with me!

Why?

She my sister! I need her here.

This is an embedded cultural thing and there is nothing I can do, to change the world here, to fit my mold. I chose to live here and I am more than happy fucking this kid, so I guess, her sister is going to be added to the household and the dinner table.

What is your sister's name?

Jelou.

*OK. Jelou can come, **if** she really wants to leave where she lives now, and not because you want her here. Are we clear?*

Yes! Thank you!

Not so fast. Invite the people she lives with and your sister to meet with me, if she really says she wants to come. ... I will make sure this is her request and not just your desire. Now, ... is there anything else?

OK to invite Myra's parents for supper?

Tonight?

Yes, OK?

Myra wants this?

Yes, she text me to ask you.

OK, tell her yes.

For the life of me, this seems as weird as it gets. But if they want to come I guess we invite them. Still, maybe more is better than fewer. *Jezryl, how about if we invite Jecim's mother and uncle as well?*

Really? Wow, good idea! Her uncle has wife and kids. OK to invite them too?

Yes.

OK, we do it. Wow! Party!

Yes, but do not include your sister in this. We will do that separately and when it fits the schedule of those with whom she lives now. You understand?

Yes. OK.

Yes indeed, it will likely be a party, tonight. It will also likely assist me in avoiding any awkward questions tonight. And I will not get fucked with, by having Jelou slide in without proper vetting.

Anything else?

Can we rent a videoke?

We have one.

Where?

Look in the utility room behind the washroom. It is under some tarpaulin.

Dirty ice cream²⁵?

Isn't it too late to order that for tonight?

I will check. Is it OK if I can?

Yes, I guess. But we don't know if anyone is really coming.

Ha! They will come. You will see.

OK, anything else?

Filipino food tonight?

Yes.

You need more beer and some Tanduay or Fundador I think.

If they are coming, you can get a case of "San Mig" Pilsen²⁶ and four bottles of Fundador Light. Anything else?

I go to the market?

Find out who is coming first!

²⁵ While American ice cream was made with cow's milk, **Dirty Ice Cream** uses the milk of the carabao, a kind of water buffalo. The result is a cheaper product which has become known as "sorbetes" or "Dirty Ice Cream," in the popular lexicon. Both kinds of milk are widely used today. Coconut milk and cassava flour are two other ingredients that make it distinct from ice cream made in other countries. Flavors include natural fruits such as mango, avocado, melon, jackfruit, coconut and ube.

²⁶ San Miguel Pale Pilsen is a classic German style barley brew without adjuncts.

OK, OK. And with that she takes her leave of me. No wonder why she was pacing just inside the doorway before, considering all that being bottled up inside her.

I never stopped working the wood as we spoke and I continue once she has gone. It gives me something to do, which I enjoy. Does it have great meaning? No. Is it 'whittling' away my time? Sure. Is it aimless? No, but to argue that the aim is worth anything other than to allow me to spend my days in peace, would be exaggerating the value of the act. My days are for my enjoyment, and for no other purpose. There is no goal I have set out. I am adding nothing to the universe that makes a damned bit of difference. I am simply enjoying being alive. Isn't that enough?

I have a sense of something in the wood now. It is still a gentle feeling, but it is there. My knife begins to find its way.

Jecim has joined me. She sits patiently until I deign to recognize her presence.

Yes, what is it?

Thank you.

For?

Inviting my family.

Ah. You are welcome. Is anyone coming?

Yes, of course. They all come.

Who is 'all?'

Mother, uncle, uncle's wife, their four children.

Not your father?

My father is dead. My step-father, he not come. He not live with us. My mother live with her brother.

With Jomar's family?

Yes.

I see. Is Myra's family coming?

Yes. Her mother, father, a sister and her child, a brother, his wife and children! It will be very good. Sir I will go to the market now, OK?

Yes, that is fine.

Sir, is it OK if my mother and uncle's wife come and help us prepare for the party tonight?

I smile. A party like this is a lot of work. My girls will need help. *Of course. Will that be enough assistance?*

Maybe, but it would be better if we have one of Jezryl's friends help too.

OK, I agree.

I just know I will have problems keeping all the new names straight tonight. But I already know Jecim's mom. So that's easy. The other one with her will be Jomar's wife.

The videoke will be noisy and I will take my leave of those who are singing when that occurs, but it should be a nice party. These things are generally raucous, but filled with good humor and courtesy. As there are two family groupings, there will be no unpleasant discussions as that would cause some to lose face. No one will want to do that. To lose honor in that fashion is more than unseemly. It simply doesn't happen when the elders are still around.

The wood continues to talk to me as layer upon layer is removed. The sun is high in the sky now. The heat of the day is far more demanding. My blade continues to ease its way through the jumbled grain, as a voice that I do not know, asks me, *What will it be, Sir?*

I look up to see a pretty girl of teen years, in a crop top and very short shorts, barefoot, looking right at me, with a hint of a smile on her charming face. Her toenails are painted blue. Her feet are wide by the ball and toes, and as such, show signs of rarely seeing shoes. This must be Jezryl's friend. She is cute and too young.

I don't know. It hasn't told me, what or who it is yet. But it will soon.

It will talk to you?

I hope so. If not, all there will be, is a pile of wood shavings on the ground when I am done.

That is silly, Sir.

It may be silly, but it is true. ... Who are you?

I am Vieve. Friend of Jezryl.

Thank you for coming to help us today.

You are welcome, Sir. I go back to work now. Good to meet you.

Nice to meet you, Vieve.

Oh, Sir? I come to tell you, lunch is ready.

Inside the house I catch sight of Jecim's mother and another woman, who must be Jomar's wife. I ignore them. They are busy and do not need me interrupting them.

Jezryl has found the videoke. It is being wiped down and made more presentable. I have no doubt it will be turned on soon enough to satisfy any concern that it might not work.

Voices fill the air, but none of them are sharp. There is a level of teamwork between individuals who do not know each other but share a common heritage and culture. This is not the first time that those who do not know each other will join to get a party ready. It is probably more the norm. All is OK. It is as it should be. I finish my meal and return to the wood.

Mid-afternoon I hear something just inside that seems to need resolution.

What is the problem in there?

Jezryl's voice answers among the hubbub, *They want to know what you do but are afraid to come out and see.*

I don't bite. Why the fear?

They afraid you will be angry. I know that not happen.

You are correct. Ladies, come out now.

And they do. All of them. Jezryl asks, *May I show them the one you finish?*

Yes.

She lifts the cloth that covers ‘She of the Wood.’ There are gasps. Jomar’s wife asks, *You do this?*

But before I can answer, Jecim responds, *Why we show you his work if he not do it?*

Yes, of course, I am sorry, but this is so beautiful. This is art. What will the one you work on now be?

I don’t know yet.

Maybe it will be me! says Vieve.

This one is a nude. I don’t think you want to have a naked carving of you for all to look.

Why not? She is beautiful.

Thank you for that. I am happy you find her beautiful.

It is Jecim’s mom who speaks for all of them. *We all see her beauty. You are a true artist, Sir Roland. Any of us, I am sure, would be happy to be your model.*

I guess if I used models, the concept would be intriguing. As it is, I do not.

Jecim’s mom decides the itch they needed to scratch has been satisfied and gets them off the terrace and back to prep work.

As my hands once again return to the wood, I ponder a curious reality. Here in my home I have always, married, or separated, been surrounded by women. There is an absence of men. At times when a few Filipino men come, they will grab a bottle and settle down outside. If there is food, they will come and fill a plate before going outside. But often they don’t even come. It is the women who

come inside, married and single. I have often been the only man at the table of eight or more women.

Are all beautiful?

No, but many are fine.

Can each of them be had?

No, of course not. Such an assumption can get you killed or at least in serious trouble. But all want to be your friend and all want to flirt a bit.

And so, it ends up tonight. A brother does not show up but the guy's wife and kids do.

Myra's father also doesn't come, but her mother is here. The only other man... is Jomar.

Jomar stays long enough to eat supper, pat me on the back and tell me that I am respectful of Filipino culture for having such a party before leaving with the excuse that work calls for him. The Fundador has not been touched.

The females are a very different story. Both Myra's sister and her sister-in-law flirt with me. Vieve gropes me, much to my surprise. Jomar's wife pulls me aside and tells me that she finds me a good man. She hopes I will give her some nieces and nephews. Myra's mom has no English but, through Myra, she tells me about the same thing. And then she says something that I most assuredly did not see coming. She hopes I will give Jezryl a child and give her a reason to settle down.

I am without words. Yes, it very well might happen that Jezryl gets pregnant. But why did she go so far as to say she thought it a good thing?

As the kitchen has been cleaned, all other tasks completed, the videoke does get a good workout. Other activities include a card game, gossiping and teasing between all those here.

I decide to retire to my bedroom.

I have brought a brandy upstairs with me and am reading a book when the door opens without what I would consider the requisite knock.

Good evening, Sir.

Good evening, Vieve. What brings you to my bedroom tonight?

You don't want to sing, Sir?

No, it is not what I enjoy.

Am I pretty, Sir?

Yes you are very pretty.

You like me?

Vieve, I do not know you. You seem nice.

You want me to make you feel good?

Really? You want me to fuck you?

If you want. You want?

Does Jezryl know you are up here?

Yes. She tell me where I can find you.

Does Jezryl know what you want me to do?

Yes.

Was this your idea, or hers?

Both?

How do you know Jezryl?

She no tell you?

Come on, Vieve, if I knew, I would not be asking you.

You know what Jezryl do when you meet her?

Yes.

Me too. I do that.

Sometimes you do it together?

Yes, sometime if the guy want two.

Do you go to school?

No, no more.

Do you have a family?

I live with my mother and my sister.

Does your mother know what you do?

My mother, she do the same thing, Sir. Maybe that why she have me and my sister.

Vieve, go home now.

No, Sir. I stay the night here and help clean up tomorrow morning.

OK, go down and sing with the rest. We will not fuck tonight.

You don't like me?

I never said that. I don't want to get any illness and before I would even consider it, you would have to be examined by a doctor. So no, it is not that I don't like you. It is that I don't want to get something from you and I don't want to give that to my girls.

I not sick, Sir.

Vieve, what you mean is that you do not feel sick. You do not know if you are sick.

Yes, Sir. Maybe you correct.

Now go and join them and have a good time.

Yes, Sir.

The kid leaves and I take a good long sip of the brandy. I return to the book. I get about ten more pages read before there is a knock on the door. Who the fuck, now?

I get up from the bed, after putting the brandy and book down, and open the door. There stands Myra's older sister. The one with a kid

and no husband, whatsoever. I was told her name, but for the life of me, I can't remember it. I certainly didn't think I'd need to know it tonight.

Good evening. How can I help you?

Good evening, Sir. Sir, I talk to my sister. I think you need more help here. I can do this for you. Whatever you need, Sir. I am sure I am able.

I see. No limits?

Sir?

How long has it been since you were with a man?

Six years, Sir. Why you ask?

Does your sister know you are up here now?

Yes.

Does she know what you are offering?

Yes, Sir. She knows.

OK, come in, take your clothing off and get on the bed.

Sir?

You said, 'Whatever I need.' That is what I need now.

She is not moving. I think this whole damned thing is funny. Each thinks that she has found the gravy train and all she has to do is jump on. Time to send her downstairs.

Well, thank you for your generous offer, but I don't think I will have a place for you here. Why don't you go back down and rejoin your sister.

Something snaps inside her head. I can almost hear it happening. It is a physical thing. She does not say a word, but she comes into the bedroom, removes every stitch that is on her and gets on the bed.

As I remember she is a good ten years older than Myra. She looks fine out of her clothing though there would never be any confusion between her and a teenager.

I lock the bedroom door and disrobe. Once on the bed I pull her head down to my dick and wait to see what happens. She is doing a serviceable job of sucking me off. It isn't world class, but it is not bad either. I move around a bit enough so I can play with her cunt. All I have to do is touch it and she spreads her legs and pushes her hips up to meet and encourage me.

In short order, she is wet. I pull my dick out of her mouth, reposition and plunge into her cunt without protection. I don't think she is staying for the whole thing. I will fuck her for a while and then get her to back out and leave, leaving me ready for Jecim later tonight.

For a thirty-two year old woman, she is every bit as tight as is Jecim. She is right there with me as we build. I am enjoying her greatly, but I don't need yet another here. I have more than I need already.

God knows I don't want to stop. I want to see her face as she feels my cum enter her. But I am going to be cruel because there is no place for her here.

Damn, she is good. Her cunt muscles are doing a morse code message on my dick. I squeeze her ample tits, pinching a nipple. She cums hard.

I laugh, *You miss that?*

Yes! Yes! Very much!

But if you come, I will fuck your little daughter. You don't want to be mine. You need to protect your little girl. And I pinch her nipple again very hard.

Oh my God! You want to fuck her! OK, Fuck her, fuck me. It OK. Whatever you want. Whatever you want. Whatever you want. Whatever you want!
Ooohhhh Fuuuck!

And she cums again. This time my balls are boiling and they deliver the hot punctuation to the end of this conversation.

Ticket to ride

I saw her daughter downstairs, but I have no designs on the kid. I have no idea how old the kid is. I was trying to freak ‘mom’ out. It doesn’t work. So much for maternal instinct.

I’m not going to touch the kid but, it goes to show you what you can expect, when folks are looking for a way out and up. I am not sure I know what the fuck to do with the woman.

You really want my daughter? You fuck her? Sir, she too young. It not right.

Ah, interesting. She didn’t mean it. She just wanted to get off.

Look I am not going to fuck your daughter. So don’t even think it is a possibility. I am not sure what to do with you. I don’t need another mistress. I don’t need another maid. I don’t need your kid here. ... You were good in bed and I am sure you would be a good and loyal partner. But tell me, how many females does one man need?

She is looking at me, totally frozen. I am sure she has not a single idea of what to say. I get that pretty clearly. I grab my cellphone and text Myra, who I suspect is downstairs, singing. The text asks her to come up to my bedroom immediately. Putting the phone down, I get up, go to the door and unlock it. I pull up my slacks but tell this woman to stay as she is.

It doesn’t take long for Myra to appear. As she walks into the room, I get behind her and lock the door again. There on the bed, is her naked sister, with clear evidence that she has been well fucked.

I turn Myra to me, holding her shoulders, as I speak to her. *You sent your sister up here to seduce me. Well, I fucked her. Now, Myra, what do you expect me to do with her? I don’t need a fourth mistress. I don’t need a maid. I don’t need a seriously underage teenage girl running around here as I fuck two sixteen-year-old girls. Just why did you send her up here and what did you expect to happen?*

She good to you?

Yes.

So?

So... what? What do you expect to happen?

Keep her.

You going to eat her pussy like you ate Jezryl's?

Silence.

You expect her to eat Jezryl's pussy?

Silence.

What happens when Jezryl teaches her daughter how to do a girl and maybe a guy?

Silence.

Well, Myra?

Silence.

Myra you know who came up here a little before your sister?

Who?

Vieve. You know who and what she is?

No.

She is a prostitute who wants to live here. Jezryl wants her to live here. She likes girls too. Do you understand that, Myra?

Silence.

Take your sister downstairs. Take her out to the terrace and sit with her. Talk to her about what you and she think you are asking for. When you are done, if you are still asking me for something, I need answers to all the questions I asked just now.

You going to allow Vieve to stay?

I haven't decided what to do with Vieve. I will have a conversation with Jezryl and Jelou tomorrow. I doubt that Vieve will be welcome here for the same

*reason that I don't want to even consider your sister. There are enough here already. But added to that, this is no place for your niece. Remember that Jelou will be here too and that is already complicated. She will likely stay, but this is not a hotel. This is not a free ride on a jeepney²⁷. This is **my home**. I have to have a reason for you to be here to stay. Are we clear on this?*

Yes, Rolie.

OK, get her dressed and out of here now.

They do leave. I am an asshole. I know it and I don't care.

I go back to my book. Thirty minutes later there is a knock on my door. Once again I open it, to find Jecim's mom standing there.

Hi, are you leaving? I am sorry you have to come up here because I am not with everyone else. Yes, I have bedded

Oh! No, no! Not that. I want to thank you for taking Jecim as yours.

I am not sure you should be thanking me. your child and will be happy to call her mine until the end of my days. But she is one of three that I can say that about. Jezryl and Myra have the same claim on me. I have bedded them as well. I will never lie to you, and allow you to think I am a good man. I am not.

Yes, my daughter tells me the truth. Maybe she learn to do that from you. I know this. It OK. It what you say when we first meet. Nothing new, I think. I glad you respect me to say the truth.

OK, so why did you knock on my door.

If you ever have a problem with my daughter, come to me. I will fix it. I promise. Don't send her away, if she stupid. I will fix it, I promise.

Madam, of the three visits I have had here in my room tonight, yours alone is appreciated and welcome. I promise you that if there is a problem I will come to you.

Ah, you have had visits from ones who want to join you?

Which ones are you thinking about?

²⁷ Public bus-like conveyance ubiquitous in the Philippines.

Vieve and Alida.

Alida, Myra's sister?

Yes.

Well you are correct. Both have been here.

What will you do?

Madam, what do you think I should do?

Why you ask me?

Because I trust you to tell me the truth as best you know it. I trust that you are looking out for your daughter's interest, and hers includes my interest.

Oh! You honor me again.

Well what do you think?

Vieve is a prostitute. To this day she still is. I am not sure if it is because she likes this or must do it to live. If the first, you must reject her. If the second maybe you should allow it.

And Alida?

Yes, that one is difficult. She has a young girl. This girl should not be here. The child should not be close to two girls who were prostitutes, even if they say they not that any more. I think it will be a problem. I think maybe Alida is good and good for my daughter. I not sure about how that is with Jezryl. But the child. This is a problem. I am sure this does not help you. Sorry.

No, it does help. It is close to my thinking and lets me know that the things I am thinking have value. You are seeing things much as I do. Please share this with your brother. I very much will appreciate his view on all this.

Certainly! I will do this. Thank you very much.

And she excuses herself.

It has been quite a night. Myra and her sister, Alida, have not reappeared. That might mean they are still talking. It might mean that Alida took her kid home. It might mean that they decided it was a bad idea and are just not coming up. I don't know and at the

moment I don't really care. It is getting late. The gals can party as late as they want. I am going to bed.

I am getting out of the shower, only to be handed my towel by Myra.

As I start toweling off, I ask, *OK, what's the question?*

What if her girl stays with our mom? Then it not a problem if she stays.

Who said it isn't a problem? Besides the fact that a mother should never leave her daughter, do you really believe your sister is ready for Jezryl or Vieve?

Silence.

Myra, I understand that you miss being with your sister. I understand that your sister is lonely. I get it that Filipino men don't want a woman with a teenage child. I get all of it. But I didn't create your sister's problems and I am not the solution to them. You need to decide whether you need to return to them there or stay separate from them and have a life here. ... My home is not the place for all, or just anyone who wants to stay. It is a place for a few. Those few must fit my needs and this place. ... Now, I admit I may allow Jezryl to bring Jelou here. I have not agreed to do that yet, and in the end, I may not allow it. But the cultural issues regarding a younger underage sister with no other family are very different from that of you and your sister. ... And if I don't allow Jelou to stay, it will be for the same reason I am saying 'no' to you now. Alida is sweet, probably good, and I like her. But there is no way I want her kid here. Her abandoning her kid is far worse than you separating from her. Clear?

Her head is down. I think she is crying, *Yes. ... Through sobs, Maybe you will like her girl?*

Oh Jesus, Myra. Really? Exactly how do you mean that?

Sorry, sorry! She runs out of the bathroom, but as she steps into the bedroom, I hear her exclaim, *'Oh!'* followed by a sentence or two in Cebuano from Myra, before the door closes.

Into the bathroom walks Jecim. I gather my privacy is of no concern these days.

I am done toweling off and I hang up the towel, while ignoring her presence until she speaks. *You have had a busy night!*

True enough. What brings you to me now?

I talk to my mother about her visit with you.

And?

You will not need to complain to her. Not ever.

Good.

She tell me about Vieve and Alida. So I decide to see you. But I see Myra go into the bedroom. I wait until I hear the water is turned off and come in to the bedroom. I am lucky, Myra not know I am here.

So you heard everything?

Yes.

And?

You right. You very right. I am happy.

I see. What did Myra say to you when she walk out and find you?

She ask if I hear everything. I say yes.

I didn't hear you speak.

Oh! I say yes like this. Her eyebrows go up twice. It is a quiet way of speaking they have. I would not hear it, but it was most assuredly seen and understood.

OK, but she said something else.

Yes, she say she miss her sister very much.

She may need to leave us.

Yes. I think she will think about that now. She want to stay here, but she also miss Alida. She try to have both. It not possible.

OK, so is there anything you need to add to that?

No, you do right. What you do tomorrow for Jelou? What you do about Vieve?

Your mother had a good question about Vieve. I will use what she wondered when I talk to Jezryl about her. When it comes to Jelou, I need to meet the girl and talk to the couple who are caring for her now.

My mother help?

I have to laugh. The concept that her mother was a help to me seems somewhat impossible to her. And yet she did. She asked the core question I need to resolve before I decide anything else. Why do children devalue the knowledge of parents?

Yes, she was a great help. Now if you will excuse me, I am going to bed.

OK, give me a few minutes. I will shower and join you.

No sex.

I know. It doesn't matter. Just be close, OK?

OK.

And so, five minutes later my bed companion slides in under the sheets and pulls my body to hers. We sleep.

I know coffee contains caffeine. I know caffeine is an addictive drug. I guess I don't care. I want it in the morning. The rest of the day I don't give it a second thought, but in the morning I want it.

This morning is no different, other than Jezryl and Vieve are waiting for me as I descend the stairs. They want to talk, now. I want my coffee, now. They will have to wait a couple of minutes. Until I have taken a few good sips, I am not going to talk to anyone about anything. So they need to let me be.

Jezryl is not getting the clue, but Vieve does. She grabs her friend and pulls my companion back rather briskly.

Finally I have settled a bit with my cup and I nod, giving them an indication that I am ready. Holding each other's hand, they join me at the table.

Jezryl, explain two things to me, why did you invite Vieve to come here yesterday, and then, why you had Vieve come to my bedroom last night.

She text me, she is hungry. She ask, can I give her any food? I know we need help with the party, so I say come help and you can eat. No problem. That wrong?

No that is fine. And the rest?

She see what happen here and she say she want to stay too. She ask, how she do that? I tell her it up to you. She not see you and ask where you now? I tell her you upstairs.

Did you encourage her to ask to stay here?

Silence.

Vieve, did Jezryl say it will be good if you can stay here?

Yes, she say that.

Vieve, if you have enough to eat and a good place to sleep, do you enjoy your life?

Yes.

You enjoy having sex with the men you meet?

Yes. She giggles.

It is fun to you to see what they want and how you can make the most money from it?

Yes! Very much. It a game I think.

So, if you have the best possible way to be, it would be eat good, sleep safe and still do the work you do?

Yes, this true.

Vieve, do you think that when you knew Jezryl before, that she was like you in that way?

How you mean?

Did she really like the game as much as you? I bet you are really good at the game and like it a lot.

It true, she not happy with it the same as me.

I turn straight to Jezryl. I look her in the eyes. I take a few sips of my coffee, before putting the cup down on the hardwood table.

Jezryl, do I have to explain this to you?

No, Rolie. I see why my friend cannot stay. I not want that life. I think maybe she do. Maybe she need it. She turns to her friend. If you get food here and good sleep here, you will be unhappy, because you cannot do the game anymore, or maybe you go out and do things Rolie not want you to do. You not right for this house. I sorry. If you very hungry again, come, I feed you, but this not a good place for you.

Vieve has a stoic expression. She is a kid who clearly has had a number of hard turns in her life. I never assumed otherwise. I am not insensitive to such things. But she is not right for me and this house.

So far, of the last two who have tried to get onboard, neither has been given a ticket to ride. There is one more passenger waiting at the station. She is more likely to get permission to climb aboard, but there are no guarantees with that one either.

I take a bit more coffee before addressing Vieve. *You are welcome to spend the day, eat a couple more meals here before you leave for your work tonight. You may come and visit once or twice a week, during the day, have a meal or two each time. I am not angry with you. I do not dislike you. You just are not someone I can add to my life here. Do not offer me sex and do not have sex with anyone here. That is the rule. Break it and you may never come back here again. Do you understand and are we clear?*

Yes. I understand. You are very clear.

Jezryl, anything else?

Nothing about this. My sister comes for supper tonight with the others.

OK.

The two leave the table. I have a small breakfast, and finish my coffee before exiting out to the terrace.

I retrieve the wood I am working with, settle in, remove my knife from the pocket and prepare to start my efforts for the day when

my cellphone rings. Putting my knife down, I pick up the phone from a table where I had placed it. The screen tells me the call is from Jomar.

Good morning, how are you?

Very good! Thank you for your hospitality last night.

You are welcome. May I ask the purpose of your call this fine morning?

It relate to the conversation you have with my sister.

Yes, Yes. Good. I am seeking your view on all this?

May I ask what has transpired?

As of now, I have refused both requests.

And your reasons, Roland?

With Alida, I do not want her child here and I do not want her to separate from her child. With Vieve, she may have difficult times, but she enjoys the prostitution. She would not be a good fit.

Roland, you do not need my advice. Your judgement is good and I agree with you fully. Yes, this Vieve is a sad one, but as you say, if she likes the thing there is no option for her.

I gave permission for her to stop by once or twice a week for a meal, but not to stay and no sex.

That is a generous offer. It is charity and shows a good heart. Our savior will smile on you.

Oh Jomar, considering the three females who live with me, I suspect it would take a mountain of charity to balance the scales.

No, you do good to those three. Nothing to repent for in that, I think.

From your mouth to God's ear.

Excuse me?

Nothing, just something my mother used to say.

Oh, OK, well, talk to you another time. I must go now.

Yes, thank you for the call. Bye now.

The wood has been patient. But patience is wearing thin. My knife and the wood meet. I suspect this will be a productive day as slivers of fine wood fall to the floor and more is exposed.

It's odd, but a good blade works with you to discover that which beckons. A bad blade fights you. Its resistance to your hand and will makes finding what is hiding within quite impossible.

There are far too many bad blades in the world. This blade is good. It obeys my needs and does not push back. It and my hand become one, a single instrument. The result is that I can hear the wood as it calls out to me. I figure myself a very lucky man. Yes there are times I have to wait on the wood to call out and so there are times when I must just stop and wait for word. But it always eventually comes. Then it is just a matter of following along. A sort of follow the dots. It is set out waiting for me, no thinking involved. I am just transcribing from the whispered instructions to the knife and the knife, back to the wood. It is a virtuous circle.

If only life was so simple.

Against good judgment

Today she revealed herself. The wood and I understand each other. I have spent the entire day with her. Slowly her voice came clearer, until I could truly understand her fully. Now comes the task of working with her to peel away the detritus that remains.

But the light is fading. She knows it and accepts that we are done for the day. I put her next to her good friend, covering them with the same soft cloth. I put my knife back in its pocket and clean up from today's efforts.

I feel a little clammy and go up to take a shower and a change of clothes before supper and our guests.

For the second time in far less than twenty-four hours, someone is handing me my towel as I step out of the shower. This time it is Jezryl.

Should I assume that our guests have arrived?

No, not yet.

So why are you here?

I want to say, you are right and fair in what you do this morning.

Ah, you learned something about yourself in that process?

I think, yes. I know why this right for me. I also think what you do with that Alida, it right too. You know about my mother and what I learn. You not want her child to learn some things. Not the same, but still wrong for the girl. Correct?

Yes, that is right.

Then you are very good. I thank you for that, but you know my sister, she already know, because of my mother. So it not the same with her. You see?

Yes, I was aware that this might be true. I wanted to learn when she left your mother.

Last year. Mother leave us last year. She go with guy to Cebu, we not see her after this. She text sometime, but she not come back. Then we hear she dead.

So your sister was exposed to your mother's sexual activities?

We see her fuck many guys.

Did she see you fuck guys?

This question is a little close to the bone and Jezryl winces, but she does answer. *Yes, she see it.*

Did she fuck guys too?

No, I not think so, but she sucks a guy cock once, when mother tell her to.

How old was she then?

Maybe twelve?

Nothing else?

No. So you not worry about what she know. She know all. Too late that.

Yes. I understand. And you are sure she is not a prostitute now?

She not. I am sure.

OK. I am thinking she can leave as I am needing to dress and go downstairs, but Jezryl has a different agenda. She squats down in front of me, and takes me orally. She has her hands on the globes of my ass as her head bobs up and down on my dick, taking me very deep. She comes up for air every once in a while, but what she is doing has me fairly well distracted from the mechanics of her activities. It occurs to me in a brief moment that I have never heard of a wife who does this for her man. Marriage is evidently bad for your sex life.

Her nails are digging in to the muscles of my ass. Her forehead is smashing against my belly as she takes me down as far as she can. My legs are going wobbly. I can take just so much. My dick is going nuts. My nuts are feeling the call. Nuts,... I tried to hold back, but nature has its way. Cum leaves me and enters her. It's a hell of a way to end a shower.

Ten minutes later I am downstairs and relaxing, with some jazz playing, sitting in my easy chair and getting a foot and hand massage. Now, this, my friend, is the life.

Sounds outside announce the arrival of our guests this evening. This is far less a party than a meeting and an interview. Supper will be standard Filipino fare, basic comfort food that will not be a shock or new to anyone. Chicken adobo, pancit, and pinakbet, all accompany the rice. Sprite and Coke are the beverages other than water. All seem comfortable and there is pleasant chitchat during the meal.

Jelou seems like a decent kid. She looks a lot like her older sister. Nothing stands out and there are no signs for concern. Her current guardians seem like a nice couple and their own two kids are well behaved. Just a nice family. A couple of times the wife mentions she knows Jelou wants to reunite with her sister, and ‘gee wiz,’ but they just couldn’t accommodate that in their home.

So OK, I get that she, at least, is looking forward to getting Jelou out of their home. I suspect that they have a very strong desire for wanting the kid out of their home, but I can’t get out of them what it is.

If the kid is disruptive, this couple won’t tell me... and if the disruption is sexual advances towards her husband, neither will tell me that as well.

But I have an idea. Maybe I can get the wife to spill the beans about any sexual stuff if I play against the normal assumptions. That means I have to separate husband and wife. During dinner I get up to carry a plate into the dirty kitchen²⁸. As I go, I signal Jecim to follow me out.

While outside, I quickly ask her to see if she can manage to peel the husband, Jezryl, and Jelou, off from the wife so I can talk to her. She thinks she can but she will need Myra’s assistance.

²⁸ Outside kitchen area where cooking is done to keep the heat out of the house.

Later as the supper dishes are cleared those two get a chance to hatch the plan. It's fairly simple, all will be given a tour of the property, but the wife will be asked to help out in the kitchen for a little bit.

I think the wife knows something is up, but plays along good heartedly.

Once we have her in the kitchen separated from the rest of the pack, I have Jecim with the mother and me. I am sure the subtlety of my questions may be misunderstood and I need Jecim to backstop me if things go south.

So the conversation isn't exactly like this as Jecim had to step in a couple of times to clear up meaning, but this is sort of close.

Thank you for playing along, so that we can talk frankly.

You are welcome, Sir. How may I help?

I want you to understand that this is an unusual home and we are able to deal with behaviors that may be a problem in more traditional homes.

Yes, I can see that, Sir.

It seems to me that you may have good reason for thinking Jelou might be better off here. Further, those reasons may not relate to the girl missing her sister. Is that true?

Maybe a little, she has been a challenge for me.

Is that a challenge of willful behavior, or maybe sexual acting out to you or your husband? We can deal with either of these things but we will need to prepare. Or maybe it is violence which would be a challenge for all, but might be better if away from your young children. Frankly, I need to know what the issues are before she comes.

Sex, Sir. It is sex. She is having sex with my husband. He doesn't know I know, but I do.

Is there a risk she might be pregnant?

I think, no. Not that type of sex. She use her mouth on him. I see them three times. Each time it was that.

I see. ... Has she had sex with you?

The woman blushes, but says, *No!*

Madam, allow me to be very clear. I see nothing wrong with that type of sex and do not think it is wrong if it happened to you. You blushed when you said, 'no.' I think something has happened. Please tell me so that I am prepared.

The gal is just about ready to have a meltdown, and Jecim holds her, whispers something in her ear, and then we hear, *She use her mouth on me. First time she say, she gives massages. Her mother teaches her how. My hip hurts. She say she can help that. I allow. But she do my sex with her mouth while she do the massage.*

You liked it, right?

Sorry, God help me, I sorry.

You don't need to be sorry. But that was only the first time, right?

She nods.

It happens a lot and you feel guilty. You want it to stop, but you let her each time, right?

She nods as she weeps.

Is that all she does with you? Doesn't she stick something inside of you?

The gal's head pops up and stares at me... *How you know? She tell you?*

No. But it seems like something she might do. ... You feel out of control? But your husband has been refusing to push her out of the home?

Yes!

So this offer is a Godsend?

Yes, yes it is.

Does she do sex with anyone outside of the home?

No. I am sure she does not.

How can you be sure?

She and me talk, why she do this.

What does she say?

It her way to make sure she has a place to live! I tell her she can stay even if she stop, but she just laugh. She say that not true. That not the way the world work.

We will take her here, but I am going to tell you something you don't want to hear.

What that?

You are going to miss her. I suspect you will be here needing her soon enough.

No!

Well, maybe you are right. Time will tell. I think it is time to rejoin the others.

Jecim helps her dry her tears.

I rejoin the group first. All is OK, and there is a great deal of talk about my efforts at carving. Jelou is handling the ladies in a very sexual manner.

This kid is going to present us some real problems. I will accept her, but she can come only after I have a long sit-down with her older sister. The kid needs to believe that so long as she is under her sister's protection nothing else is needed. If that fails, I am going to have a very sexually active young teen on my hands.

We wind up the evening early as the young kids need to be in bed. Tomorrow is a school day. It is agreed that Jelou will join us in two days, a Saturday. And then they are gone.

We four are standing at the front door, as I tell Jecim to fill Myra in while I sit down with Jezryl, upstairs. That gets surprised looks from two and knowing eyebrows from Jecim.

Upstairs in the bedroom, I sit on the bed and pat the mattress next to me. Jezryl thinks this is about sex and starts to disrobe, but I stop her and get her to just sit down.

Your sister is not a saint. She is using sex to control both her guardians. She is giving head to the husband and fucking the wife with toys as well as eating the woman out. This has not happened just once. It is all the time.

How you know this?

Jecim and I talked to the wife. First she admits she needs your sister out because of what the girl does with her husband. But then it comes out that Jelou is doing her too. She starts sobbing. She apologizes and is sorry. We tell her it is not needed. We just need to know what we are dealing with. I ask her if your sister is having sex outside the home, she says no, it is her way of staying safe there. Jezryl, she is trying to control the world around her in the only way she has ever seen it work, through sex, just like your mother taught the two of you.

I not know. But you agree to take her? Even knowing this?

Yes, basically because we need to get her out of that home before she starts up with the younger kids.

What you going to do?

I want you to work with her. See if you can get her to understand that you are taking care of her now and you are both safe. She doesn't have to worry any more. She can relax.

OK, I try this. What if it not work?

I don't know. Let's try to stay positive on this for now. Now I ask you to go down and tell the others what I have asked you to do.

Yes, OK, I do it. Rolie, thank you. I not let you down. I never be with another. I promise. I not like Vieve.

I know, Jezryl, I know.

I have a book here from last night. I start up some jazz, wedge some pillows against the headboard and pick up the book. It isn't time to sleep yet, but I want to allow the girls to deal with this without me in the room.

For Myra, it is a heads-up that should reinforce why I said 'no' to her sister. Jecim will get why Vieve is not here but Jelou will be. I miss my brandy, but I can do without. It won't kill me.

I get maybe five pages read before all three just open the door and enter. Privacy? It seems they never heard of it.

Yes? What is it?

Myra is the one to speak and I am not sure if she is ticked, or just scared. *It won't work.*

What won't work?

Your plan!

Why?

Because, Jezryl is not your wife and we are here.

Explain, I am still not following you.

We will be threats to her. We have our own relationships with you. Jezryl can't control that. ... On a separate matter, OK I see why my sister can't be here. You right about that, but this makes it even more sure that she must not be here.

I am not following you. I'm not arguing, just not following. You have something that will work?

You think she uses sex for control?

Yes, she admitted it to the wife. It makes sense to me, based on her behaviors.

We have to take control out of sex.

How do you do that?

Make it what it should be, play, fun, sharing, loving, caring, and all around her from all directions.... We three know you not want to fuck young girls. We respect that. Truly. But, Rolie, you need to make an exception. We all need to fuck her, alone and in groups. In all combinations and all ways. No control, just play. No hiding sex. No making it secret or dirty.

Jezryl, she is your sister. What do you say?

Myra right.

Jecim? What do you say?

I not have sex with another girl. You know that. I am not sure about that. But maybe Myra right. Jezryl need to teach me I think.

Well I see the logic but the law scares me. If I ask the three of you to sit down with Jomar and explain what you are proposing and tell him I have reservations, I will abide by his decision. Sometimes what is right is also not doable.

But he will say, 'No!'

Yes, I expect he will and then it will be 'No.' I am not putting my freedom and safety in jeopardy to solve someone else's problem. If she can't control me, if she can't seduce me, if it just freaks her out, she may leave, or she may just quit trying. I don't know. But I am not happy with your solution, even if it is the best solution. Still, if you can convince Jomar, I will agree.

Myra wants this resolved. Jecim, call him now. Tell him it urgent we meet him.

Jecim accepts the instruction and calls her uncle. Evidently, he agrees to meet with them. The girls go downstairs to await his arrival. I want nothing to do with this and stay exactly where I am.

I gather he arrives, but I stay with my nose in my book for a good hour. That ends when Jecim comes back and asks me to join them downstairs.

When I get there, all are assembled and Jomar has a bottle of the Fundador by his right hand and a glass with ice partially filled with the brandy.

He offers me some, but Myra jumps up, informs Jomar I take my brandy warm and goes to pour me some of my stuff in a snifter. Jezryl runs to get a lit candle by me.

Jomar laughs, Roland, these girls really take care of you! It is quite amazing. You are very lucky I think. I think you are a very strange man. They offer you every man's fantasy, and you say, 'No,' call the police and see what they say! No other man in the world will do that. None! And yet, yes, and yet, I see your point. Why put yourself in danger to solve another's problem? It is OK to help another, but there must be limits I think. You and I will agree on this.

Yes, Jomar, that is my thinking.

Still your girls present me a case where to do as they suggest is the only reasonable solution to a real problem. So what to do? Yes, that is a problem. This one, this Jelou might have destroyed a marriage, and that is a sacred thing as you well know. If she is not cured of this problem now, she will do evil in this world. I am sure of this. Roland, I think two things. I think I need more brandy as I am about to say a crazy thing. ...

And he pours more of the Fundador. Yes the crazy thing is... Roland, I think you need to do it. It seems to me that your suggestion, the girls told me, is to deny the girl the sexual contact. I think that will blow back and may do more harm. She may accuse you of that which you do not do, out of her fear. Yes, I think you need to do what the girls want. And now, yes, ah the brandy!

I am looking at PNP Officer Jomar and I am having a problem wrapping my head around what he has just said. I take a long draw on my brandy, swish it around my mouth before swallowing.

Lessons in love

Somewhere the gods are laughing.

There is no question about it. This makes no sense. But what are my options? Do I kick Jezryl out and tell her she needs to start hooking to take care of her damaged sister? No. That makes no sense. Do I go back on my word to the couple who have been taking care of the girl? God only knows what happens to them and their marriage and their kids.

If Jomar is right, following my suggested plan might end up worse than doing what the girls want.

Yes, somewhere the gods are having a good laugh. I wanted a life without the poison of that failed marriage. I thought that multiple mistresses was the answer. But, especially here in the Philippines, people aren't singletons, there is always family. And with that, all the complications natural to such affiliations.

The forward progress of a marriage ended. I was stymied. There was no way to move forward. And so, I took a side step. One side step, and then two, and then three. It was supposed to end there, but now things are going ever farther sideways, far beyond my control. My life has gone sideways.

I don't recognize my life any more. Who am I becoming? I never in my life touched an underage girl before. How can I say that now?

The girls have come back in, after giving Jomar an epic send off with all their thanks and a full bottle of Fundador. They are almost giddy.

There had been hope, on my part, that he would excoriate them for the suggestion. In their hearts, they never really expected Jomar to agree with them. Now that he has, there is the discussion of how to get Jecim comfortable with the girl on girl stuff. But it's time for bed and I am going up to sleep. Let the girls work it out.

They have worked it out by entering my bedroom and my bed. All three of them are here. Jezryl informs me that Jecim wants to be with me when this is happening. It's something about being with a man while she is with a woman that makes it less freaky for her. I am not sure I grasp the significance of it, but Jecim slides up next to me and asks that I hold her and kiss her while 'they do it.' What 'do it' is, isn't explained, but I guess she is about to get eaten out.

I am happy to hold and kiss her. Jecim is my friend, a lover, loyal, lovely, sweet in temperament, a fine homemaker, ... all that, and impossibly young. I am more than happy to kiss her. Her lips do more than tolerate me, they seek out and evidence a real need. I feel it and respond in kind. I feel her need for closeness and caring.

As the other two work the nether regions, Jecim's kissing becomes more fervent, more animated. She is biting my lip, grabbing my head and smashing it toward her face. She pulls back and gasps before plunging her face back toward me.

Her body is bucking, thrashing around on the bed. I cannot see what is happening. All I see are her eyes and her black hair, but the events below are having an effect on her. She is cumming hard, almost biting my lip in two. She gasps again, cusses and gasps anew.

I hear giggling below. And then, from Myra, *OK, see? You like it! Now do us, girl.*

Jecim's face is smack dab connected to mine. She pulls it back enough to ask, *Fuck me while I do this please?*

So the idea is, she can eat pussy, **if** she is being fucked. I find the concept a bit humorous, but don't say anything other than, *OK.*

A complete repositioning is required. The girls put Jecim on her hands and knees. I am to enter her from behind while she eats out each of the two sequentially.

Last time I could not see a thing. Now I have a ringside seat. And it is quite a view as Jecim is face deep in Myra's cunt. Jezryl seems to be providing guidance to the student of the art, while at the same time, stimulating Myra, with a hand on Myra's left tit.

For her part, Myra seems to be enjoying things if not rocking out completely. I am gently, rhythmically, providing the needed proof to Jecim's psyche that she really likes men, I guess, as she provides evidence that she can do a girl but good.

Jecim must be getting better at what she is doing. Myra is getting off good and hard now, and the more she is, the more animated Jecim becomes in her task.

Finally, Myra says, *enough*, and Jezryl pulls her student back from her work. But now, Jezryl throws her student a curve. *You do me while I do you. We do sixty-nine. Rolie, you fuck Myra good. And then we done.*

Jecim is really not ready for any of this, but what happens next, she is not ready for at all. Jezryl pulls her student in for a spit swapping deep kiss. Jecim's eyes are wild in panic, but the teacher dominates her student and gains control.

The student submits. The kiss, if that is what one should call such a complete statement of control, lasts a long time. Jezryl finally pulls back, strokes her student's cheek, before telling Jecim, *See? You **can** love me. Now we love each other in the complete way. When we done, we lovers forever.* She kisses her student once more, before moving around, to initiate the sixty-nine.

Jecim is clearly in a state of confusion, but she allows Jezryl to continue. Myra moves toward me with a hunger in her eyes that is unmistakable. She wants to be under me. She wants to look up at me. I don't have to be a mind reader to figure it out. I am hard, and slick from Jecim's cunt. I slide into Myra without any effort, reaching the bottom the first time. We are four. We are two couples fucking. I have never experienced anything like this in my life.

Have I lived a sheltered life, or is this just weird shit? How do I evaluate what is happening here? All I know for sure is that I am balls deep in Myra and Myra wants to be fucked. I ignore the other couple and concentrate on my partner. Myra wants to be fucked hard. She wants to feel my need. She pulls my head to her and asks quietly. *Am I as good as my sister?*

Really? She really is afraid she doesn't measure up to Alida? Now that is truly sad. Yes, Alida was fun in bed. But Alida is not one of my partners. Myra is. What more does she need to know? Still I gather that such logic will be meaningless to the girl. Especially at this moment. *You are every bit as good.*

And she is, of course. There is not a damned thing wrong with Myra. She is pretty, sexy, a good fuck buddy and she is mine, evidently for as long as I want her to stay, which I have told each is as long as I live, so long as she is good to me. So I guess she is here for years. Why does she care if Alida is a good fuck? Alida isn't here, she is.

As to the concept that she is a long term partner, there is no incentive to leave me as there was with Charline. And that is the difference between a wife and a mistress of a married man. The goodies stay goodies only for as long as she is onboard. So, yes, she looks to be here for a long time.

We continue to fuck. It is not gymnastics, it is fucking. There is no special technique, it is just fucking. But Myra gets wetter as we go. She cums, and we continue. She cums again, and we continue. She is panting, and cumming. We continue. She asks, *Cum, please, cum, please.* It is a plaintive voice, calling for my cum over and over as she cums yet again, my dick moving into and back from her cunt. I hear, *Oh, Rolie, oh Rolie, cum Rolie,* as I continue to jack in and out of her cunt. She is very wet, very hot, and lost in bliss. I cum. She sighs and whispers, *Yesss.*

I look over. The sixty-nine session has ended and the two are face to face. Little kisses are exchanged. Jezryl softly strokes Jecim's left cheek and chin and nibbles the girl's nose. Both are smiling. I move to the opposite side of Myra, hold her and drift off to sleep. I guess at some point someone turned off the lights. I sure didn't.

When I awaken in the morning Myra is gone. She has to work today. The other two are dressed and about to leave the bedroom. Jezryl turns to me, giggles and says, *Good morning sleeping beauty,* and the door shuts behind them as they exit, giggling.

Over breakfast of boiled saba banana with muscovado sugar, and my requisite coffee, I ask Jecim if she is OK now with the girl-girl thing. She informs me that she still needs to ‘do’ Myra, as per Jezryl’s instructions to her. I guess I don’t understand why that is needed and so I ask.

Jezryl say I naturally submissive. Same Myra. She submissive. I need to learn to take Myra and control her body. I must do that before Jelou come. I not to let her dominate.

I see. But what about Myra? Jezryl not worried about that?

No, she say that Myra not as submissive as me. It will be OK with her when Jelou come. It is me who must learn. Jelou allowed to have sex with all, but she must not dominate. That important.

Thank you for explaining.

So there you have it. Jezryl has become the major domo, orchestrating a huge shift in the dynamics of my home, to deal with the arrival of her sister. I am not sure how I feel about this. Clearly Jezryl’s sexual knowledge allows for more complex thinking about the subject. But is she right? Is all this necessary?

Jelou arrives tomorrow. I wonder what my life will become as I slip yet farther sideways.

Now, however, it is time to exit to the terrace. It is time for the second lady of the wood.

My life inside the house seems to be on greased rollers. Outside with the wood, there is stability, certainly, and a basic truth. The wood cannot lie. It isn’t duplicitous. It doesn’t engage in game theory. It is exactly what it presents itself to be. I can know and trust it.

There is no truly ‘knowing’ another person. Not in the most basic way. All play the angles. All have hidden agendas. All. Make no mistake about it. You can never really know another person. You can ‘get to know’ someone. You can ‘get to’ be able to predict how someone might respond. But you can be surprised, because you never really know.

People are exhausting. The wood is not.

To carve, is to meditate on truth. To allow truth to be unveiled, slowly, and with dignity.

My knife feels good in my hand. It is as if it, and my hand, were made for each other. Living flesh and steel joining to extend from the flesh a sharp true edge. As the edge encounters wood, it is not a foreign object I have to coax through a piece of passionless wood. It is my edge moving through something that sings out, seeking to be released from timeless bondage of the extraneous material.

To carve in this way is a religious experience. It forces one to understand that the world is here for many purposes, not merely for the enjoyment of humans. What lays within has meaning too.

I am having to go very slowly now. There is a great amount of detail that needs to be revealed. I will not be done today, but I am getting close.

Lunch comes and goes. I see Myra return from work. I notice Jecim and Jezryl go to and come back from the market. I am not in a walled off state, but the comings and goings do not interrupt the flow of my work, of my hands.

The setting sun, however, does. I put down my work, put away my knife, and clean up the terrace, before going inside to clean up myself.

Tonight, I am told, I will be with Jezryl as the other two will spend their time in another room, my presence being no longer required, by Jecim, in her studies.

This is the second night in a row whereby I have not decided with whom I will lie. I am not liking this change. I say as much and am promised that the matter is a temporary inconvenience. That is all. I hope it is true, but time will tell.

Supper is over and with a brandy in hand and jazz filling the air, I settle down for a couple of hours to read and relax. But that is not to be.

I have a visitor. I had thought when she appeared, she had come to see her sister, but Alida is asking to speak with me. The book will have to wait. I remain seated as Alida is brought to me. I indicate she should sit in the accompanying easy chair which sits close to mine at a comfortable angle. It shares a small side table, where my book is now resting and where she and I might place a glass.

I ask Jecim to get her something to drink, and after some quick back and forth, she is brought a glass of water.

Alida, why have you come to me tonight?

You know why, Sir.

Maybe I do, but tell me anyway.

I want to live here.

Maybe you do, but I suggest you say instead, 'I think I want to live here, but maybe I don't know enough.'

No, Sir, I am sure.

I see. And what do you propose to do with your girl?

Sir?

Well, is she to live here too?

I hope for this.

I will not attempt to explain the damage that might occur to your daughter. But if you stay, she will be damaged. If you stay, you will be changed in ways that will make you a very different person.

My sister, she lives here. I see no difference in her.

That is proof of nothing Alida. Do you know what this house looks like?

Of course, yes.

Alida what color is on the back of this house?

Why you ask that?

What color is it?

How I know?

I take a sip of my brandy. Nuance is hard. For many Filipinos I have met, their view of this is binary. If they have a contract, they might say, *'this the March payment'* even though the payments might be based on the 20th of each month and two payments touch March. If you ask, *'Which payment for March? Is it up to the 19th, or the 20th on?'* The response you get will be one of, *'That not how it done here. This the March payment!'* And so, there are times when there is no way I can explain... but I most assuredly do try.

Exactly. But you claimed you know what this house looks like. Right? But, you don't. You only know that part, which you have seen. You have not seen all of it. You only know about those parts of your sister that she allows you to see.

I not understand.

OK, well... Do you hope to spend the night here?

Yes. This is my hope.

Has your sister told you to come back tonight?

No, she tell me this place not for me.

Good, I will reward her for that. Why did you ignore her advice?

I think she just not want to share.

Really? Hub... OK, I will allow you to try to spend tonight. If you are still here in the morning, you will have to survive the next night which will be even stranger. It is my hope that at some point in the next two days you decide that your sister was telling you the truth. That this isn't right for you.

Why you say that?

I am not going to try to explain. You will have to experience it. Now, this is my time to relax, so you might want to go find the girls and chat with them until nine when I go to bed. And if you see Jezryl, would you please tell her I need to speak with her right away?

Yes, Sir. I do that.

Five minutes later Jezryl appears with an unreadable expression. This won't take long and I hold on to both book and brandy.

Alida is proving to be a nuisance. I want to shock her so that she leaves and leaves us alone. You will still be in my bed tonight, but we will add Alida. I am not going to fuck her. You do that. I don't care how kinky you get with her, or what you have her do. Just push her hard. If she stays tonight, she has to be one of us. OK?

Very much, yes. I know what you want. I do it. No problem. Thank you for this!

For what?

You trust me.

Yes, I do. You are welcome. Now go, I want to read some more.

She giggles, kisses my cheek, tells me I am crazy, and goes.

Yes, I know I could have told Alida, 'No.' But such a response comes with its own problems. Spurning someone is rarely a smart thing. It is just as bad as asking someone to join you who will freak out by what you want.

In this case, both her sister and I have told her, this isn't for her. She has insisted that she wants to be here and doesn't believe our cautions. When she finds out that we were right, she will not feel spurned, nor that she was snookered... at least that is the hope. We will see.

Enter at your own risk

Both Alida and Jezryl are in my bedroom when I enter it.

Why she here?

Alida, you said you want to live here, correct?

Yes. I want to be mistress.

Do you understand that Jezryl is a mistress?

Yes.

Well? What is the problem?

She say she to love me tonight.

Is that a problem?

I your mistress, not lesbian.

All my mistresses love each other. It is required of my mistresses. I told you that the other night.

I think that just sexy talk.

No, that is real. You can leave now, if you like. But if you stay, it will happen just like Jezryl told you.

Myra not do this.

Yes. Myra does this. Do you want to watch Myra do this?

When she do this?

What do you mean? When did she do it the first time? Or maybe, when did she do it the last time?

When last?

With me? Last night... but it may be happening right now, with Jecim. At least, I was told that was the plan. Is that right, Jezryl?

Yes. We look and see?

But my sister not lesbian!

Yes, we know, but it really doesn't matter. It is happening and it will happen with you tonight if you stay.

You just trying to scare me!

No, I am not. Jezryl, take her and show her what her sister is doing. Then give her the option of leaving or coming back without any more problems. But she must understand that she cannot return tomorrow if she leaves tonight. As you are well aware, tomorrow we entertain someone else. Unless Alida learns how to pleasure a woman tonight, she is unwelcome tomorrow when, if she is here, she must do so convincingly to our guest.

Alida is standing as if frozen in place. Jezryl tugs at her, and Alida finally moves following she who is pulling her, though as she does, she is looking at me the entire time until she is completely out of the door.

I have no idea what happens next with Alida, but for me the answer is simple. The nightly ritual, a few minutes with the tooth brush, followed by a shower is next. Life is like that. The normal human rituals that we all follow. Characters in books don't ever seem to do them. It is like they are immaculate, never shitting, pissing, sweating, brushing, showering, putting their pants on one leg at a time... but life is different. Life is an articulated, segmented series of events sandwiched in between those rituals. We mark our time that way. We know it is morning, afternoon, or evening with the placement of those ritualistic markers before, between and after.

And so, I will lie with either Jezryl alone, or with her and Alida, tonight, but it will be after the shower and before sleep. A slot in time.

Sometimes hunches actually work out. Sometimes, and this is one of those times, close enough anyway.

I come back into my bedroom to find both of them sitting on the bed talking. I am in my robe, as I heard them from the bathroom, and decided that it didn't sound like a lovefest. Not that they were arguing. But it sounded like a serious and subdued discussion.

When I enter the bedroom, the conversation ends and I see a satisfied look on Jezryl. Alida's face is one I cannot read. But I gather I am about to find out as it is she who speaks.

What you say about knowing my sister, you right. I not know her. I not know what she do. I not know that I really need to do this with all. I think just for you.

And?

You know, this Jezryl here she almost young enough to be my daughter?

Yes I am aware.

She just few years older than my daughter.

Yes, I know.

This not a good place for her.

I agree.

This not a good place for me.

I agree.

Why you not tell me to leave?

Better if it is your decision.

You not angry with me?

No. I am not. I like you. This just isn't a good place for you.

Thank you. You are kind in this I think.

I am glad you think so. You are always welcome to visit your sister here.

Thank you for that. I go now, OK?

Yes. ... Jezryl, please help her get a tricycle.

Like I said, sometimes the hunches play out OK.

Ten minutes later, Jezryl is back in the bedroom. She is smiling, humming, and happily getting ready for bed.

Eventually, we are both under the covers, and as much as sex may be on the menu, the first course appears to be some talking.

Rolie, what you say to her, she not know her sister, you right. She see her sister eating Jecim's pussy and she in shock. I pull her to my room, and tell her to get clothes off. She look at me and say, maybe she make a mistake. You do right.

I hope so. Now how do you want to get fucked tonight? On your back, on your knees, or do you have something else in mind?

On my back. I want to look at you while you fuck me. I like that. I like you OK with me being the prostitute. You like me, you treat me good. You are my only guy, but you not play a game. You not try to act like this is love. This is sex. I like it. You like it. You respect me. I am your prostitute. This is good. Now, your prostitute want you to fuck her hard tonight. Very hard, Rolie.

She's right, of course. That is exactly what is going on. It is not love. But I don't want to call her a prostitute, a whore, or a kept girl; I like her, respect her, and want her, but love? No. Not love. Desire, yes. I desire her. Want her to stick around? Yes. I will miss her if she leaves me. But I am not a John and she cannot be a prostitute. This isn't the time for that conversation... another time. Another time will be far better.

Her cunt is slick. She may have put some lubricant on, when in the bathroom. She has spent at least a year or so as a pro for God's sake. She knows what she needs to do. Her toenails are painted blood red, as are her fingernails. She has no panties on under her little nightie.

I am hard enough to push in to her. I will get harder as we go. It feels good to be inside her. It is a homecoming. A good, warm, and safe place for my dick to be.

Ah, it is nice just to slide in and out of her. I caress her cheek with my hand. I am not trying to get her off. I am just enjoying her.

I know she said she wants it hard, and she will get that too, but I want to take some time and just enjoy her. She is pretty. I am fucking a pretty girl, who absolutely chooses to be under me. She is looking up and me, I suspect wondering about what I am thinking.

I smile. I am lucky to have her in my life. I am lucky to feel her cunt with my dick.

I pinch her left nipple. She responds, pushing her cunt hard against me. I pinch hard and hold her nipple hard between my fingers. She hunches her cunt and I slam into her, once, twice, and again, again. The pinching continues as does my ramming into her. She cries, *Yes*. I fuck her hard, over and over again. I give her no time to settle from the assault.

I weigh more than twice what she weighs. Her body is being pounded into the mattress hard. The bed shakes. Her cunt muscles are no longer able to tighten. Orgasms have wiped out any muscle control. I feel her as a man feels some clothing he has put on. I wear her. She is there but not constraining me in any way. My dick wears her cunt.

Her body has given me all it has to give and I give her my cum in return. All I hear is a soft, distant, *Yesss*.

The morning brings with it the usual rituals. Jezryl is happily going about her activities as is Jecim. Myra has gone to the pharmacy. All is seemingly normal. Seemingly, but not really. Jelou arrives this afternoon. This is going to be a very different sort of day.

Still, I have time for the wood this morning and I am enjoying it. I can escape the doings in the house. I am insensitive to any tension that might exist. It is a cocoon to exist within as my world shrinks down to me and my knife, and 'she of the wood.' There is nothing else. It is, I guess, what you might call a Zen-like state.

I am getting close to the final cuts. There is more to do, but all the cuts that need to be made are clear to me. I can see what needs to be done. I am no longer searching. I have found what I sought. It is here in my hands. It is safe in my hands.

At lunch I can feel the tension that gives animation to the two girls. There is a sense that we will be breaking the laws of the universe late today, but that it must be done to stop what is in place from causing more things to come unstuck over time.

Those things being unstuck, are the natural and, I guess you can say, the expected results of the mother, and the upbringing of a child and that, to allow the universe to behave as it ought, we should stand back and allow it.

But Jezryl hopped off that downward path and she is adamant that her sister also get off the path, regardless of her sister's current intentions. It is a tricky business. I am not at all convinced this is right on so many levels that enumerating them all is as much a daunting task as it is pointless. We are now committed to this craziness and are, if not barreling along, moving relentlessly toward it.

Intellectually, I can comprehend a fourteen-year-old sexually devious girl. But I am quite sure I have never met one. Or at least I don't think I have. How one gets to that package of traits conjures up an image of a massively abusive and sick early childhood. And to assume that one can fuck someone out of being fucked up makes no sense to me whatsoever.

Yes, sure, I heard the arguments from the girls about how this is the only avenue, but the more I have thought about it, it makes no sense to me. I suspect all we will have done is to give Jelou a larger palette of sexual tools to wield in the future. She may find that she cannot dominate us, but as she emancipates from here, why assume all will be sweetness and light? I suspect we will be releasing a very dangerous young woman on an unsuspecting world.

Once again, there is no way I can share my thoughts successfully with my companions. And so, as I sit here, eating my noodles in chicken broth with egg, these two are making plans that will be the likely training ground for God knows what.

I will have a shortened afternoon with the wood. Our guests are said to be arriving at three. But the way that works here, it means we will see them an hour later, at four.

As it turns out, I do not have to shorten my time with the wood. Jelou and her female guardian arrive a little after five. From the look of the guardian, someone got off good and hard just before

the two left to come here. I wonder, whose need was sated and which one was providing the solace. I think I know, but nothing is clear.

I am cleaning up the terrace, as my two have taken 'possession' of Jelou. The guardian, and even though I have sort of spoken to her in the past, I am not sure I have ever heard her name, comes out to the terrace. She wants to thank me before she leaves.

Why are you thanking me, madam? It looks to me like you love her. Clearly you had sex with her just before you came here.

She may not be able to speak English well, but she understands me. Her eyes go big, she takes a step back and stumbles on the edge of a small table, almost falling down, before I can reach out and help her regain her balance.

You can tell?

Yes.

How?

Does it matter? My question to you is, do you love her?

No!

Ah, you hate her for the way she makes you feel. Correct?

Yes! That true.

The feeling is of need. You do not want to feel the need?

Yes!

But you do, and you always will now. So what will you do about it?

She gone, no more.

It is that simple?

I think, yes.

I bid the woman a good evening at the gate, she flags down a tricycle and is off. I have no idea what actually happens now. I think of the sign on Dante's gates of hell, *'Lasciate ogne speranza, voi*

cb'intrate.' It is said to translate to 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here.' At this point, ought I to put such a thing over my gate? Is it not apt?

Or is passing through our gate more like the sign at a construction site, '*Enter at your own risk*'?

And so, with ample warning I enter my own house.

There is no one to be seen and nothing to be heard. I am curious and I open a bedroom door to find all three of them, in various states of undress. Jezryl is sitting on the floor, masturbating. Jecim is on the bed and has her leggings pulled down. Jelou is bent over and eating Jecim out.

From the expression on Jecim's face, I gather that Jelou must be reasonably accomplished at this task.

Well, no time like the present. I get behind Jelou and pull down her shorts, after unbuttoning a side button and lowering a zipper on the said shorts. Jelou clearly knows what I have done but may not know exactly what I plan to do next.

From all I have been told, she has been the one in control, giving head, eating pussy. So, if all are to be believed, she is still a virgin. We will see if the myth matches the reality.

It is five-thirty. Jelou has only been with us for fifteen minutes as I run my dick hard and deep into her cunt from behind.

The girl cries out. She clearly was not expecting this. In my peripheral vision I see Jezryl going nuts on her own fingers. I call over to her, *Take care of Jecim, while I fuck your sister.*

I figure I have given Jelou enough time to acclimate to my dick. I start fucking her in earnest. I have a firm grasp on her hips as I rhythmically pound Jelou's cunt.

She is a small girl, though is likely at her final height. She is barely any smaller than is her sister. At four foot eight inches, and maybe 85 pounds, there isn't much to her. Her cunt is smooth, tight and amazingly wet.

She has no guile as this does appear to be her first fuck. She is without artifice as I repeatedly run my dick into her young teenage cunt. She isn't saying 'no' and she isn't saying yes. She is saying nothing at all. Not a grunt, or a whimper.

Her black hair hangs down on both sides and obscures her face completely. My view is of shoulders, a sweet back with the dimples toward the bottom of the spine, and cute ass. That is all.

I reach around and find her clit. That does seem to have an impact on the kid as she gets more active, arching her back and attempting every way she knows to get me into her deeper.

Jecim has pulled Jezryl up for a kiss. There is a small conversation, before each move around on the bed.

The two surround Jelou and me. Jecim latches on to a one of Jelou's nipples. Jezryl latches on to the other. They start sucking hard, as I pound her cunt hard while squeezing her clit at the same time.

Jelou cries out in apparent ecstasy. We all keep it up and a second orgasm follows in short order, her cunt muscles tightening and squeezing my dick convincingly. But I am not ready to cum yet.

I keep up the pounding rhythm, as the girls continue sucking on Jelou's tits. Now we hear the girl cry out. The sound means nothing, but the dam is broken. She is not in control and the sound is an acknowledgement of that fact.

For some reason, my balls are happy to get the message and send cum deep into the girl, eliciting another bellow.

My hand is still on her clit and I do not let up as I am sliding out of her, my dick shrinking in size as it loses its stiffness. The manual stimulation sends the girl into one more orgasm.

I am done and back off her. She collapses onto the mattress.

Welcome to my home, Jelou. Here, sex is a normal part of life. You cannot get anything special by having it or giving it. You cannot control anyone with it. We will all fuck you. You may stay here for as long as you live, so long as you

are good to those around you. If you are not good, I will kick you out, no matter who you are having sex with. I will kick you out if you have sex with anyone outside this house. In this house, sex is not power. You may leave if you want to. No one, including your sister, will bring you back if you choose to leave.

With that, I get up, dress and leave the room. No one has said another word.

Satisfaction

To say that Jelou is surprised by how the house works, is to simply understate the obvious. She was expecting to establish a powerful cabal with her sister here. Now that fantasy has crumbled as the reality that she has been stripped of all her powers becomes clear.

The kid is beyond confused. She had put all her energy into her ambition, via sex based manipulation, to control others and thereby maintain her safety net. She now finds herself in a world where she cannot use sex to control anyone or anything, and if she uses sex outside the house, she must leave. Sex has been removed from her toolbox. And yet... sex is everywhere in the house.

She has to form a new relationship to her own sexuality. And that, it is fair to say, is creating a huge problem for the girl.

It would appear that accepting the concept that feeling super good when receiving sexual attention is what sex is about, runs into some deep seated ideas that tell her she should never allow that to happen.

The fact that she has no ability to control anyone or anything inside the house, has resulted in multiple temper tantrums from the kid. It is less about what she wants than it is about her inability to get **anything** she wants, unless we agree she should have it.

Jelou feels the need to regain the control she has lost. It is unavailable here. She knows that. So she has decided to attempt to re-enter the home of her previous guardians, to undo the damage she has created for herself by leaving them. She reaches out to the wife. I learn of this only because Jezryl is keeping a close eye on Jelou's use of a cellphone.

The gal has agreed to meet her. Because of Jezryl's snooping, we know where and when. I decide on a plan.

Based on what we learned earlier, when we met the wife, it appears that Jelou has been using a carrot and a stick approach with the gal. Giving her the sex and conveying the need for the sex, while at the

same time, telling the woman that, if she refuses the advances, she will rat on the woman to the gal's husband, as well as others, alleging that it is the woman who has corrupted Jelou. To do so would bring shame and possibly criminal charges against the woman.

I text Jomar, and ask for a meeting. It appears that Jomar is more than happy to meet and comes to the house an hour after I contact the guy. We sit on the terrace and discuss the matter.

All inside the house, Jelou included, are aware that there is a PNP officer here. All, except Jelou, know why he is here.

In Jelou's mind, it represents both danger and opportunity. She is desperate to upset the applecart here. She desperately wants to get back to a place where she felt in control. The fantasy about joining with her sister has fallen into the waste bin. She sees her reaching out to her sister as possibly the worst decision she has made in her young life. She feels trapped. Never mind that she is safe, she has no control. That cannot stand!

As Jomar and I speak, it becomes clear when he mentions two names that I have no idea to whom he is referring. And so, it is Jomar who finally tells me the names of the guardians. They are Ermei and Toto.

We talk about how to approach the problem. Jomar has a definite way he prefers and I bend to his will on this. It might not be what I prefer, but that really is beside the point. I need complete buy-in from Jomar. It is his choice to make. I do not have a moment to warn or inform anyone, as it begins.

I call into the house. *Jezryl, please bring Jelou out to the terrace.*

The girls arrive. Jelou's face is a mask. It is not she who speaks. It is Jomar.

Miss Jelou, you are under arrest for solicitation, immoral acts, and blackmail. Turn around, and put your hands behind your back.

It is my turn to speak in this little play. *Officer, is this really necessary?*

This girl is blackmailing Madam Ermei. A complaint has been made regarding this blackmail. The child is a prostitute. She needs to go to jail.

If she promises to not contact Madam Ermei again and not attempt any blackmail, can you release her into my custody?

No, Sir! She will accuse you of the same as she has accused Madam Ermei. She is not to be trusted.

But if she does, you will know it is a lie, correct?

Sir, she will find a way to slide into your bed. She is a prostitute. All prostitutes get pregnant. That is how this one was born!

So, allow her to stay here. I will get her pregnant and you already know she is a prostitute. What is the problem with that? If you know all this, how can she blackmail me?

Jomar looks at Jezryl, You are the sister, correct?

Yes, Officer, it is true.

What will you do if this girl gets pregnant? Will you file charges against this man?

No, Sir! My sister is wrong to do what she does. I think best we keep her here. Rolie make her pregnant, many, many times. That best. No more prostitution. No jail!

God bless Jezryl. She must have figured it out. She shows no real fear. It is more a certitude in what she is saying.

Jomar says he is unconvinced. He turns Jelou around and looks right into her eyes. If I hear one more complaint about you Jelou, I will take you to jail. Do not contact Madam Ermei. I do not care what you think a good reason is. Not once! You understand?

Yes, Officer. I know. I not contact her. No more problem.

You make a complaint about anyone here, I will arrest you for slander and false witness. You get pregnant, I not care. You are a whore. He hit you, it because you deserve it. I not care. You understand this?

Yes, Po²⁹. I see. No complaint from me. I not want jail.

We will see. I think you will be in jail soon! Good day, Roland. Good luck, Miss Jezryl. I think your sister is a bad one. I hope you can fix this.

And with that, Jomar takes his leave, not cracking the smile I am sure he wants to show until long after he drives away.

I turn to Jelou. *There is the front gate. Go if you want. No one here will stop you. Go and be the whore you are trying to be. I really do not care. Go and do as you wish, or live here by my rules and stop the bullshit. It is your choice. The Officer will probably not arrest you unless you try to talk to Ermei or Toto or blackmail someone again. I don't know for sure, but that is my best guess. So go and be the prostitute. Go now, or never give us any more trouble like this. You are safe here for your life. If that is not good enough for you, then go.*

I think, for maybe the first time, Jelou has hit a wall that is both impregnable and at the same time irrelevant. She can leave. No one is holding her. But she has nowhere to go and no tools to create a new safe place. The tools she has, have been labeled as enough to get her thrown into jail. The fact that the threat of jail is nonsense, and bluster, is something she does not know and may never learn. The other fact is that she was on the road to being the whore her mother was. That has hit her square in the face.

She looks at the gate and cries. For her, there is nothing outside that gate other than misery. Inside the gate there is all she needs to live comfortably. Comfortably but without control. The question she must come to terms with, is, can she live happily without being in control? No one in the house knows the answer to that question.

I am sitting on my chair here on the terrace. Jezryl has gone back inside. Jelou remains on the terrace, crying. I am not trying to console her. I need her to make a decision, on her own.

After a while the crying stops but she doesn't move much other than to sit down here on the terrace. Finally after maybe another hour she asks, *You going to rape me now?*

²⁹ Sir.

No. I will not touch you unless you come to my bedroom voluntarily and ask to be bedded. You can stay as a nun here as far as I am concerned. What happens with you and the others here, is not my concern.

You say you will get me pregnant.

I was just trying to figure out what the Officer would do if I made you pregnant. The answer is nothing. That was good to know. If you don't want sex, don't come to my bedroom. No problem.

If I do, you will make me pregnant?

Possibly. Why?

You help take care of our child, if I have it?

Yes, of course, why?

I not know who my father is.

OK. Wait, your sister said your father is dead. She knew him. Why do you say you not know him?

Different father. Her father dead. I not know mine.

I see. So why have you asked me about this?

Maybe it good a father there for the child.

I agree.

You be good to me?

You stop being a problem for me?

If I stop, you be good to me?

Yes.

Ah! I get it! She has figured out that she can have a level of control! If she is good, she gets what she needs, even if she doesn't get all she might want. If she tries, she really might just get what she needs.

OK, I yours now.

And she gets up and walks into the house.

What the fuck? Did she just say that I own her? Well, I will deal with that later. Right now I need to send one of the girls to meet with Ermei. She will be expecting to see Jelou in a little over an hour.

If they weren't sisters, I would send Jezryl. But as they are, I think it is best if it is Myra who goes. My instructions to Myra are simple. Tell Ermei that Jelou will not be coming today and will never contact her again. She will never be threatened by Jelou. It is over. Once the message is given, Myra is to come back.

I dispatch Myra, expecting her back in about an hour. But as the good poet Robbie Burns well knew, things don't always go as planned. Oh yes, an hour later, Myra returns, but with Ermei in tow.

This is a problem, as Jelou is inside the house. However, if I thought it was their plan to enter the house, I am wrong again. Myra tells Ermei, *Sit down here. Tell Sir Roland all. I go inside and tell Jelou to stay in her room! You not to see her.*

It is times like this that reinforce my belief that the only truth is what I find in the wood. Everything else changes, morphs, realigns, and springs anew, moment to moment, when dealing with humans. There is not a damned thing honest about my species. So what is it now?

I sit, not saying a word. Myra has entered the house on her mission to keep Jelou isolated from Ermei. Ermei has not said a word. She is sitting, head turned, unwilling to look at me.

Myra comes back and asks, *What you think? What you tell her?*

Nothing. She hasn't said a word. I have no idea what this is about.

Tell him!

Ermei is shaking her head and bawling.

OK, I will tell you. She is a fool. It true that Jelou threaten her. This is true. But it also true, she want what Jelou do. She want it very much. She want it every day. She not want her husband. She happy Jelou do her husband.

Myra, was Jelou fucking Toto, or just sucking him off?

Oh, sorry, mouth only. But she happy she do it.³⁰ What she do now? Husband want sex from her, she not want this. She want her back.

She had sex with her husband before Jelou came to live with them, correct?

Yes.

And their kids are his?

Yes.

So why the change?

Jelou. She change her mind about sex, I think.

Ermei, is your husband a good man?

I don't get any answer.

Ermei, answer, or the next thing I will do is call the PNP.

Yes. He a good man. He good but he want Jelou!

So do you. I don't see the difference. Your husband works hard?

Yes.

Makes enough money to pay bills and take care of the family?

Yes.

Do you want him to have another woman?

What?

Well, you don't want to have sex with him. Do you want to stay in the marriage and have him take on a mistress? Or do you want an annulment, or legal separation?

Oh!

³⁰ OK, so here I have left in what was really said. Note that there are two she's and they refer to two separate individuals. That type of ambiguity is common, as it is a hold-over of the ambiguity of the native languages, be it Cebuano, Waray, or Tagalog. If Myra spoke as we speak, she might have said. "*But she was happy that Jelou was doing it.*" I will allow these type of sentences at times, in the text, going forwards. Enjoy the ambiguity!

What do you want?

How I care for my kids? I need the money!

Myra, your sister... is she willing to take on two more kids and a good man who earns enough?

Myra's head snaps around and she is staring at me. She sure as hell wasn't expecting that. Ermei's head pops up, looks at me real hard and displays an anger that is unmistakable.

Damnit Ermei, if you want and love your husband, you have to take care of the man. You aren't doing that. What is it? Do you think that if you love women, you can't love a man? If you deny him sex, he will get it somewhere else.

Yes! Yes! It true. I must be lesbian. So I not be with him.

You had sex with him before Jelou had sex with you. Correct?

Yes. This true. I do it.

OK, maybe the issue is that there is no such concept as being 'bi' in her mind. You are one or the other. But how does she explain Jelou, if that is true?

Ermei, you say you like being with a female makes you a lesbian. So what is Jelou?

I get a blank stare.

Well, girl, Jelou has sex with you, and Jelou has sex with your husband. Is she a lesbian? Explain it to me.

She can't. She has no way to even deal with the question.

Ermei, do you think Jelou is a special, one of a kind creature?

No response. She is looking at me. She seems to be listening. She just doesn't have a way to answer.

Ermei, look at Myra. Ask her to speak only the truth and in your own language. Ask her if she has sex with females, and with me. Ask her if she likes it all.

As they begin to talk, I decide the block of wood in my hand might benefit from some attention. I get a bit done before Myra says, *I tell her but she say, it just me and Jelou. I go to get Jecim now. She tell her.*

I nod and Myra enters the house, while I return to my wood. But Ermei asks, *You not angry your girls have sex with girls?*

No.

You not disgust with them?

No.

You not jealous?

No.

Why you not?

No need. I am their man. I am their only man. I am happy they love each other. It makes my life easier.

Ermei seems to be meditating on this information. I am going back to the wood just as Myra reappears with Jecim. I ignore the discussion that follows. It is simply affirmation that there is a real concept of 'bi'-ness which Ermei needs to incorporate into her head.

The wood doesn't have this problem. It does not try to be something. It is exactly what it is without pretention. Its rules are the rules of physics and the structure of the universe. What it evokes within us, has nothing to do with what it is. And yet, what it evokes in me is what I find within the wood. It is how the wood speaks to me that is expressed by my hand and knife. In it all, the wood is honest and without guile.

Roland, me and Myra, explain to her, but she say she not want suck her husband. She never do that. But Jelou do that and now he want it.

Does she suck Jelou's clit?

Wait, I ask. I know why you ask.

I could have asked directly, but I think it is better that the girls do it between themselves. The conversation goes on for a bit longer.

OK I learn, she would do it, but he cum in Jelou's mouth. She not want that. She not want to get pregnant again. She not want in her pussy. She say, why he want sex? Enough already.

Why isn't she using birth control?

Church say it a sin.

Oh, fuck the Church! Ermei, it is a sin to deny your husband sex. Get on birth control and stop being stupid, or take him by mouth. Choose, or give him to a woman who will take care of him. As to sex with women, take these two, go up to my bedroom and enjoy them. When you are done, go back and take care of your husband. Do not contact Jelou ever again. Now go. Either go upstairs or out of the gate. I don't care which, but we are done here.

All I want to do is return to the wood. There is an active conversation going on around me. My girls are calling Ermei everything but smart. She admits she wants the sex but says it is wrong, but she doesn't want to be with her husband. My girls have had enough of the arguing. They pull her into the house. Ermei doesn't seem to be putting up much of a fight.

Finally they are gone and I can return to my joy.

An hour later, I see Ermei almost run out of the house and out the gate, looking a bit disheveled. Both Myra and Jecim appear a few minutes later, laughing their asses off. I ask why. Myra, through bouts of laughter, informs me, *She a horny cunt! She want it all ways. Even fingers up her ass. She like sex. She afraid she get pregnant and priest tells her it a sin to have sex without trying to get pregnant. It evil to have sex for pleasure. Stupid church! We tell her go home and make your husband cum in your mouth, on your tits, in the air. It not matter where. Make him cum! We tell her, that is an order from you! She say, OK. She do it. She not want you to send Myra's sister to her husband, please.*³¹

Did you make her cum?

³¹ Here I have softened the language for you. It actually was 'She not want you to send her sister to her husband, please.'

They are laughing. I gather the answer is that there were too many to count.

Control

Have I been too hard on Jelou? Clearly Ermei is one fucked up girl. But fucked up or not, if Jelou had not sexually inserted herself into the family, it probably would have chugged along. Sure Ermei is far from an enlightened female, but that is exactly in some ways the point. She didn't have the resources to handle what Jelou did to her and her guy.

So, no, I don't think I am too hard on her.

Rolie?

Hub? I was in my own little world. Myra may have been waiting for quite a while and I never looked up. *What?*

You think she come back again?

You mean for sex?

Yes. Jecim say she will be back.

I have no idea. What do you think?

She get very excited. I think we do things she not do with Jelou. She like it. She never do three-way before. She like that. She not have any other girl and she not allowed to see Jelou. What she do?

I don't have a clue. What do you think she will do about her husband?

I think she will get pregnant! Jecim say she not that stupid. I think, yes, she stupid. She believe the priest. That stupid. What a priest know about sex. It like asking a blind man, how high that tree! How he know?

Make no mistake about it, Myra is Catholic. So it isn't that all Catholics toe the line. In her own way, Myra has two buckets, smart Catholics and stupid ones. Ermei falls into the stupid bucket.

I suspect Jecim's buckets are labeled 'sweet' and 'savvy.' She puts Ermei in the sweet bucket. Jecim may see herself as having been in the sweet bucket until very recently.

Rolie, you really going to send my sister to the husband of Ermei?

No, though the thought did clearly cross my mind. But it would not work anyway.

Why that?

I think, after having Jelou, he might see your niece as his next plaything.

Oh!

As much as Ermei is confused, she has no interest in allowing her husband to roam more than he has already.

But she deny him sex.

She sure has. It's a very stupid thing to do. But as you say, she seems pretty stupid.

What my sister do?

I'm not sure there is any good answer. But the simple truth is that it isn't your responsibility to resolve this for her.

Rolie, she is very sad. She say you make her happy when she with you that night.

Ask her if she wants to try again where we left off last time.

I get a look that tells me all I need to know. Myra understands why Alida is not here. So why is she bugging me about it?

Supper has been a good Filipino recipe called Tambo. It's got shrimp, bamboo shoots, kernels of corn, okra, and coconut milk in it. Served over rice, it's a damned good meal.

In the middle of it, Jelou asks if she might come to my bed tonight. I am just about to answer, but Jecim breaks in and announces that Jelou is to stay out of my bed until she gets some birth control. Myra starts to laugh and Jezryl just looks perplexed.

Myra, our resident pharmacist's assistant, tells all that Jelou is simply too young to get pregnant. She must wait until she turns at least sixteen before she can have a child. She turns directly to Jelou. *Lou you too young now, OK? Enjoy your youth. There time later for children. You safe here. We will protect you. Nothing bad happens.*

Jezryl says nothing but seems satisfied. The fact that I have already cum in Jelou without protection is conveniently ignored. And so, it seems we have a new rule. There was no basis for it, other than I had just this afternoon called a decree of the Church, pure bunk. That has been transmuted into a rule about a fourteen-year-old becoming pregnant.

I don't disagree with the rule. In fact it makes perfectly good sense and of course it begs the question of why I fucked, and will again fuck a fourteen-year-old.

The bit about her being safe here is, in a way, an alternate yang to the yin about her flirting with going to jail. Jelou's yang, was get pregnant, have my child and she will be safe. This yang, is 'you are safe here, just by being here.' I am not sure Jelou will buy that concept.

I will enjoy my brandy, jazz and a good book for a couple of hours. What Jelou will be doing, I do not know and maybe in some ways I don't care. I am not mooning over her or any female in this house. Yes, tonight, I will spend the night with Myra. She knows it and I am sure I will enjoy it. But three of them are here, pretty much because I can't trust one of them, any one of them, to be a good woman, if they 'have me' as their own, alone.

There is something that, in my admittedly limited experience, changes within women when they think they have captured their man.

Maybe that is complete bullshit, but it has been my experience, and as that is the only experience I can trust, it is the motivating principle at work here.

I didn't need or want Jelou. I don't need or want Alida.

There is, admittedly, a bond that forms between older and younger sisters here that is strong, and has created a problem for me. Jecim's sisters are all married with husbands of their own. So I am spared that, though her sisters do come by and she visits them, too. Some live very close to us.

I rarely see any of their husbands. The men work hard, and at long hours. If they socialize, it is with other Filipino men, with whom they will finish off a bottle or two of rum on any given night. I am not someone with whom they feel comfortable socializing. And so, though there are other men on the periphery, I am mostly surrounded by women and girls. They are not all mine, but they inhabit my world.

Tonight there are nine females here in the house. There are two tables of card games. At one table they are playing *piat-piat*³². At the other they are playing *tong-its*³³. Two gals hang back and gossip. No one is paying any attention to me. That's just fine. I don't need attention all the time.

Each day there is a clean house, good food, laughter, and a loving warm body in bed. Exactly which warm body isn't a matter of concern to me. That isn't to say I don't care for each of them. I do. I care for Myra, Jecim, and Jezryl. I want not a one of them to leave, but I can't say that I care for Jelou. There's just no reason to care. I don't need her here. Maybe that will change in the future. I've no way to know, but as of now, she can disappear for all I care. It is Jezryl who will care. It's for that reason, and that reason alone, I allow the girl to live here.

I am aware that having a fourteen-year-old sex partner is thrilling for some men. I see nothing wrong with it on one level, but on a multiple of other levels there are all sorts of things wrong. When it comes to this one, well, I don't trust her, and so even if I thought it was OK in general, Jelou is a problem. Maybe she will be OK, but I am not sure I will ever be able to trust her. The only reason she might not cause a problem is that she doesn't want to go to jail and she seems to be without another option.

³² Filipino poker game with three hands in one hand. The cards in each player's hand is in three levels. The bottom five cards, the middle level five cards, and the top level three cards. With thirteen cards times the four players, all the cards have been dealt. There are no turns, no calls.

³³ A three handed Filipino rummy card game. Twelve cards are deal to two players, the dealer gets thirteen but must discard to open. The rest of the cards are in the center and turned over as play continues.

At the moment, she seems to be a nice kid, standing behind and leaning on her older sister's shoulder as her sibling is gambling in the game of piat-piat. Such a sight is fairly normal. Strategy in the game is somewhat obtuse to my eyes and you often see on-lookers, checking things out, as the players figure out how to organize the thirteen cards in their hand.

The game is three dimensional draw poker. Each hand is actually three hands that are laid down at the same time in three layers. The bottom layer of five is evaluated, and then the next level of five, followed by a top layer of three.

I have been taught how to play the game, but a winning hand often seems hard to determine to my eyes. There are no jokers, and so a royal straight flush is the top winning hand. You might assume that four of a kind would come next, but it is a full house, they simply call it *full*, that comes next. How they evaluate a full house is also a bit off to my eyes, but I'm not a poker player, so maybe it's perfectly normal.

A poker player may at this point roll his or her eyes, but to me the fact that an A-A-A-2-2 hand beats KKK-QQ is sort of nuts. The full house is only evaluated on the three of a kind. The value of the pair means nothing. But maybe that's normal. I don't play poker. It is the same with two pair. Once again KK-33 beats QQ-JJ.

If you have a full house, it must be on the lowest level, unless you have two of them. But what if you think you can beat all with a flush on the bottom? If doing so allows you to move more pairs to the second level, well that might make your hand stronger on the second level. So a push on the lowest level might allow you to win on the second. It's an odd game and each hand is quick, as there is a pot buy-in and no second round of betting before the laydown. There is no bluffing. It's a game of strategy. A strategy I can't fathom.

In this game, one player is the house and that hand gets evaluated against each player separately, much like is done when playing 21. Pushes go to the house, but how you can evaluate a push is one of the things that leaves me scratching my head.

My girls think it's an easier game than tong-its, because in the three player tong-its, there is bluffing, which they call lying. A player can declare they are the winner, mid game, and say, *Draw!* If no one challenges, they win. If there is a challenge, and the challenger has the better hand, they lose. But if the challenger does not have a better hand, the challenger pays double. To my girls, that makes tong-its a game for liars.

These games can, and do, go on for many hours. They will be playing long after I have gone to bed.

The gals at the table are drinking some sweet red Carlo Rossi. It is a common wine here and available at many stores. The gals often prefer it to beer or hard liquor.

The table is littered with snack foods, fried grasshoppers, (yes real fried grasshoppers) and popcorn.

In many ways, my presence is the background to the lives these gals lead. I provide the walls, the comfort, the food, and world within which they operate. But their world is separate from mine.

Yes, they see to my needs. But with three, and now maybe four, they aren't obligated to me every minute of the day, as they might otherwise be. They can operate more independently, and they do.

It is nine now and I put my book down. The brandy is long gone. I turn off the jazz and arise from my easy chair, to climb the stairs toward my bedroom.

I see Myra hand her cards to one of Jecim's sisters and remove her funds from the table. She forfeits what is in the pot to her replacement and follows me upstairs. No one remarks on it. There is not a single comment related to the event. All their concern remains on the hands and the money on the table.

We enter the bedroom together. This is certainly not the first time I have been with Myra alone. It is not a signal moment. We might not fuck tonight.

In fact with all that has transpired today, I don't feel particularly horny and Myra had sex with Ermei this afternoon.

She takes a shower, and then I take mine. There is no seduction scene here. We are a couple getting ready for bed. When I leave the shower and climb into bed, Myra is talking on her cellphone. From the nature of the conversation I gather it is Alida on the other end.

It is not a serious matter. The conversation seems lighthearted and more a matter of gossip. I ignore it and slide under the sheets. That appears to be a signal to Myra who gently ends the call, puts the phone down, and turns off her bedside light.

She moves close to me and puts her hand on me before giggling and telling me I am cold to the touch. *I will warm you up!*

She moves her hands over me, briefly touching my limp dick in a playful manner. She returns to it. *Oh, it cold and sad. Not hard when cold, I think!*

I am not horny as she starts playfully stroking my dick. But sure enough, the attention gets a response and I am becoming more rigid as she goes on and on. She has assumed full control of my dick, not that I mind a bit.

She giggles again, murmuring, *Nice. It not cold now.* More giggles follow.

To that, I have to agree. My dick is definitely not cold. I take one of her nipples between my fingers and start playing with it gently. She likes it. We are pleasuring each other but have yet to commit to anything more. It is play time. But now she moves my other hand to her cunt. She's wanting more. I slide a finger over the slit of her cunt and find her more than damp. She's wet. It takes little effort to run a finger between her cunt lips and find a clit covered with her secretions. She's hot.

OK, so it's clear now. We will fuck tonight. I run a finger up her cunt. Some girls really might not have a g-spot, but Myra does, and once she is hot, she likes it better than my playing with her clit. I can be rougher with her now. I am, and send her on to two orgasms.

We are not going to be a porn star's emulation video tonight. She is horny and I am hard. She pulls me on to her. No nonsense please, is the message, and I plunge in to a completely lubricated welcoming cunt.

It feels good. There is nothing to prove. She's already cum twice. She's gotten me hard and now she wants nothing more than for me to cum inside of her.

I have no need to cum quickly, but Myra does not want me to drag it out. Still being inside of her is its own reward, and I feel like rewarding myself.

This is straight-ahead fucking. I am on top in missionary position. My hands hold the back of her head. Her legs lock around me, as I pound her hot, juicy cunt. She is clearly happy as she sighs, groans, and calls out, *yes, yes, yes*.

The minutes slip by as we continue to fuck. Myra is a beautiful girl, and I am happy to have her, but I cannot see her now. Well that's not entirely true. I can see her face. It is a happy, joyful one. I am looking down on her as I finally cum. I get to see the change in her countenance as she feels my cum hit her. It is something that tells you all you need to know. She wanted it and she is grateful to receive it. That's what I see. I am happy I get to see it. Happy, indeed.

I have yet to roll off her. She pumps her cunt into me, and asks, playfully, *Any more?*

We both laugh as I roll off to her side. She reaches out to my dick and announces, *Good, it not cold now! It happy, not sad I think.*

I kiss her and bring her in close to me. It is time to sleep.

But Myra doesn't want to sleep yet.

Rolie, I miss my sister.

You just spoke with her tonight.

Yes, this true. But all my life I sleep next to her. When I meet you, I still sleep next to her. Now I not. I not like it. I want her come here. There room. No problem with that. Jezryl have Jelou. Why I not have Alida?

Jelou is here because she has no choice. I would be very happy to see her go. Alida has your niece. Your niece doesn't belong here and I really don't think that this is a safe place for her. She will see sexual contact that I don't think Alida will want her to see. Finally, you know damned well Alida isn't going to be OK with the sexual contact in this house for her own reasons.

We talk about that. She OK now. She want to try. You allow this?

You ask her what she will do the first time Jelou has sex with her girl. If Jelou can extend control by threatening or doing something, she will do it. So unless Alida's daughter is having sex in the open, Jelou will act out. You know it will happen.

It unfair!

Yes it is and I really did not want Jelou here. But even if Jelou was not here, the sexual activity in this house happens in the open. I am not going to change my life to accommodate your niece.

OK I talk to her about this. We see what she say.

Myra, I simply don't want your niece here. Sex with young girls is not right and not legal at all.

But if it the only way, maybe we do it, Rolie. I need my sister here.

Let's hope your sister has more sense than you seem to have. Now it is time to sleep!

OK, OK. Good night, Rolie. I am glad you not cold now!

And sleep we do.

It is late when I awaken at seven thirty. Myra is long gone. The room is darker than normal. Rain is pounding down outside and onto the steel roof. The sky is very dark. The morning sun never had a chance to awaken me.

I am relaxed and a bit embarrassed at sleeping so late. But why I should feel embarrassed is confusing. No one here cares a bit if it

should happen. It is just an ingrained holdover from my working life that has no place here, but lives on nevertheless.

So I chastise myself for this silly and meaningless feeling of self-indulgence, as I dress and descend the stairs, only to be greeted by, *Good morning, sleeping beauty!*

Immediately, the sense of guilt and shame floods back to me and I am fumbling for something to say, as Jecim and Jezryl laugh at my discomfort.

Psychology

Jelou is sulking. That is the simple truth of it. She is sulking because she is bored. For a few years now, her existence seems to have been one overarching psychological battle between her and those around her, to carve out a safe and durable space in which she might live. It was a never ending battle of wits and guile between those she contended with, and her little, small, insignificant frame.

In that epic battle, she survived, if not emotionally intact, then at least physically whole and unencumbered by a world that might well have discarded her as excess baggage.

That battle is, in truth, over, if only she can accept the result. That is the problem.

First, she does not trust the evidence that the battle is over. She fears that she has lost and is now a slave, if you will, to me. She has been told that such is not the case, but she does not trust the truth of it.

Second, is the problem that there is absolutely nothing she can do to change the calculus. She can leave. She has been told that. I will do nothing to bring her back. So fighting against me, gets her nothing. She can't manipulate anything here, simply because all the tools she has, have been neutralized. She had used sex to manipulate. No one cares here. She has used threats of blackmail, but any attempt, she has been told, will land her in jail.

And so, having nothing to do, but go to school, and nowhere to go, has left her sulking and bored.

She is surely going to school, but that neither helps nor hurts. She goes through the paces. Anything she might do to upset things at school might well get the attention of Jomar and she really doesn't want that. School gets her nowhere other than to get her the education she really sees no point in. It exists as a way to fill her day

with things she finds useless. Telling her it's the path to a job later gets you a blank stare.

When she isn't at school, she has been helping her sister with the house work, but she most assuredly does not want to be a maid. Jezryl tells her, when you clean your own home, you are not a maid. But that argument doesn't go anywhere in Jelou's brain. This is not her house and, therefore, she is a maid if she cleans or cares for it.

She has no friends. None. So there is no outlet in that manner. As a side benefit, as far as I am concerned, because she has no friends, she has not been sucked into the massively multiplayer online game universe, or MMOG. She is aware of it, but thinks the whole thing is dumb. In that regard, she and I agree, but for very different reasons.

She has no Facebook account. I find that a bit odd, until I remember she has no friends. Facebook would be very depressing to her.

She does watch teleserye TV programs and follows them intently.

As the programs air, you can hear her talking back to the characters, telling them how dumb they are. She spends her time, critiquing the on-going serial stupidity she sees and then turns the TV off, more depressed and sad than she was when she sat down to watch the programs.

Her criticisms are actually often highly evolved and accurate in understanding human motivation and personal conflict. She sees through artifice, as if it were a simple gauzy screen easily ignored as inconsequential. Her instincts in that way are very good, even if they are being deployed for all the wrong reasons.

Initially Jezryl was telling me, give her time. She will bounce back. But she isn't bouncing back as there is no place to bounce to. She has no 'normal' to which to return, and so now Jezryl is fidgeting and worrying.

It has been two months since Jomar chewed hard on Jelou's ass and we shut off her contact with Ermei. I may live in Philippine

Standard Time, but Jelou lives in Jelou Time. These two months have felt like an eternity to her.

She does have birth control now, thanks to a nurse that Myra knows, who fitted the kid with an IUD. I, however, am making no requests of her and she has not asked to enter my bed. That is fine with me. I doubt that entering my bed would solve the kid's emotional problems in any event.

She has little to say to me, and when she does speak, it is for the most pedestrian of reasons, as in a request to pass something at the supper table.

The result is a difficult fourteen-year-old teenager, and a sixteen-year-old one who clings to me as she shares her frustrations and fears.

Add to that, twenty-two year old Myra, is moping because her thirty-two year old sister is not ready to throw her kid under the bus, even if she, allegedly, might give the bi-sexual thing a go, herself.

The only one who was in relatively good spirits is Jecim. But she has to deal with colleagues who are anything but collegial these days. And so, she hangs around me for emotional support as well. I can't say I blame her. There is little laughter these days.

I made the dumb choice last week to ask Myra if she had considered leaving here and returning to her sister. Myra just about took my head off my shoulders. That clearly was not a welcome suggestion.

It went about as well when Jezryl came to me, with fear that Jelou might just strike out on her own, whereupon I ventured that is what I expected to happen, and suggesting as a corollary that Jezryl should be prepared to accept it when it came to be. Jezryl started screaming at me. I gather that I am the spawn of some unsavory beasts based on what she called me that day.

In these last months we have not heard from Ermei, a fact that I find encouraging. I was in fear that she might make frequent return

visits to my gals. That has not happened. But in the scale of things, considering how miserable all are here, that is a truly minor blessing.

There have been rumors about Charline. There was talk again, just a couple of weeks ago that she was coming back from the USA. Then, talk that she was not.

Jelou, who knew nothing of Charline, got an earful from Jecim regarding that. I gather Jelou's take on it is, Charline is stupid because she overplayed her hand. Not that she is a good person, or a bad one. Not that she is a liar, or a con artist. No, to Jelou, Charline was inartful; she had over-reached. Charline is, in Jelou's eyes, a shit-storm that blew through and is now gone. Yes there was damage to me, but at the same time opportunity for others.

As much as I want to find the essence of the wood in my hands and bring it out, for all to see, Jelou's 'wood' are humans. She is not concerned with truth, or decency, or good. Her tools are the needs, desires, motivations, and fears of those she might mold with her 'art.' The only honesty in Jelou's world is what she can produce in others. She may be very young, but just as there are musical prodigies, Jelou sees herself as a prodigy of a different type.

And so, my removing all the tools from her, my freezing her in place, has come as a heavy blow to the girl. An artist without brush, palette, or canvas, a musician without the instrument, a surfer without an ocean or a board. She thinks of Charline and, for a moment, blames my wife for her own predicament. If Charline had stayed, Jelou would not be here now. If Charline had not overplayed her hand, I would not have developed the distrust of loving a woman.

Jelou's predicament is to be laid at Charline's feet, and not mine. I, evidently, am the byproduct of a clumsy conniver. Jelou dislikes Charline, intensely; more intensely than do I.

In the past two months, the supper table has seen Alida and her daughter on occasion as well as Vieve.

Vieve shows up often. She clearly is Jezryl's friend and that is not a problem for me. Vieve has decided that I am not dangerous to her or her activities within her chosen profession. The result is that on two occasions in the last two weeks, she has shown up with a guy. Two different guys.

I gather each guy thinks he is dating Vieve. In the process, she of course is shaking the guy down for all she can get before moving on to the next. Both guys are foreigners. One is a Belgian, Stefan, and the other an American, Kenneth.

The first time this happened, when Vieve showed up with Stefan, Jezryl took me aside and asked that I not 'warn' the guy. I wanted to feel sorry for the poor stiff... that is until I met him, and then, no deal. The guy was an asshole and I enjoyed Vieve taking him for the ride he deserved.

I was playful and playing along with Vieve, as she played the guy to the max. Maybe that is wrong, but there are folks that just aren't worth shit and this guy fell well into that bucket. He was a combination of rude, abusive, abrasive, boorish, loutish, and racist. One could only hope she gave him VD, rather than he, giving it to her. Either might be expected.

The day after Stefan's visit, I get a text from Vieve. *Thank you! You great!*

I text back, *Stefan deserve what happens. Maybe not the next guy. Understand?*

I get back an, *oo.*

The next guy, Kenneth, comes to us with Vieve, with a sincere desire to meet another American and share his happiness and excitement. He is a big dumb oaf, who means no harm, but can't pour piss out of a boot, even if the instructions are written on the heel. How the clown even got to the Philippines is a mystery to me. How he got to Naval, on Biliran, is beyond a mystery. This is not a tourist destination.

Kenneth does not like to be called Ken. I learn that in the first few minutes. He is an HVAC³⁴ company installer who because of family connections owns part of the company. Kenneth has far more money than he has brains.

He isn't evil. He isn't intentionally rude, or boorish, or loutish. No, he's simply clueless. He's a big, dumb, fool. He thinks he's in love with Vieve, whom he met only 72 hours earlier. He's talking about marrying Vieve and bringing her to the States. He's no idea what a dumb idea that is, considering that he is talking about Vieve.

There is no way I want to make fun of the guy and there is no way I want to bait him like I did with Stefan. I feel sorry for him.

But I wonder, does Vieve think this is a good idea for her? I make an excuse that I have a private matter to discuss with Vieve, but need Jezryl's expertise as well in the discussion, and pull them both into the kitchen.

Vieve, does Kenneth know how young you are?

I tell him eighteen.

You know, you are too young to marry him, right?

Of course, yes.

You know there's no way he can bring you to the USA, right?

Yes, but maybe Canada or Mexico!

Vieve, if you even could get a visa, and if you try to leave the country with him, Kenneth will get arrested for trafficking an underage girl and be put in jail.

Really?

Really. You can't leave the country with him at all. If you get him arrested, I will be very angry with you. Have fun here. Make some money here, but don't hurt him.

It OK if he stay here?

³⁴ Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning.

Yes, but why do you want that?

Not sure. But maybe.

Well, he might be a very lucky guy if you can settle down with him here. I am not sure you're ready for that. But sure. I am OK with that.

He not smart. You know this, Sir Roland?

Yes. I know.

But he sweet. He kind. He not dangerous.

Jezryl asks, *You feel you can control things and be safe with him?*

Yes.

I have heard enough. *OK, good luck.*

And with that, we return to the table with a new way of interacting. I am no longer worried or defensive regarding what Vieve is doing. The mood at the table is lighter and easier going. I decide that while Kenneth will never be a close friend, he is a decent guy that I will get along with, if he stays.

I still doubt that Vieve can hang in with just one guy, and I doubt that Kenneth will decide to stay in any case, but that is not my concern.

For a few days, following the dinner with Vieve and Kenneth we hear nothing.

Today I get a text from Vieve. Kenneth is lonely and wants to come for a visit. She asks, *OK with you?*

I text back, *Yes.*

Exactly what we will talk about is beyond me. He is not one with whom I would have socialized, if I was still living in the States. It's not a class, religion, or race thing. It's more an educational and social thing. Kenneth is barely a high school graduate. How exactly he even graduated high school is not a compliment to the public school system in the States.

He doesn't read books. He says he doesn't like to read at all. He doesn't follow the news, or politics. He doesn't care about history. Has no clue about art. He doesn't know anything about jazz. His favorite sport is something he calls MMA and the UFC. I have no idea what those things even are, but he says it is like boxing but much better. He follows football but little else. He likes to drink beer, he is bemoaning the fact that he can't get Bud Light here. He thinks gays and lesbians are mentally disturbed. He thinks brandy is weird, and he wonders, isn't it what those gay-boys drink?

Do I really have to go down the list and explain why each of those things are at odds with me and my sensibilities?

We have damned close to nothing in common other than the fact that at this moment, we are both here in the Philippines. That is pretty narrow ground upon which to spend an afternoon, much less a friendship.

Shortly before Kenneth is to arrive, Jezryl sits down with me.

Rolie, I text with Vieve. There a problem.

Oh? OK. What is it?

Kenneth want to leave.

And?

She want him to stay.

And?

She want you to tell him, he should stay.

I can't do that.

Yes, I know. But you find out why he want to leave. He not tell her this. Maybe it something she can fix.

OK, I can see about it. But explain to me, why she wants him to stay. I thought she wanted to have many men. I thought she likes the game.

I think it true. But maybe no. Maybe she think different now.

Kenneth and Vieve arrive about an hour after they said they would arrive. It's Filipino time. I am used to it and think nothing about it. I have learned to not anticipate the arrival of others, but rather to be prepared in case they actually arrive at some point.

Vieve knows that Jezryl has discussed her concern with me, and she doesn't attempt to interact with me at all. Instead she leaves Kenneth sitting on the terrace with me and goes into the house to find Jezryl.

Afternoon, fella. How's it going?

Hi Roland. I guess it's OK. I mean, Vieve is great and all. But... well... don't you miss it? The States I mean?

How so? What are you missing?

TV, roads, food, Walmart, people... everything.

I see. No, I don't, but many folks do. Most folks like it here for a little bit and then need to go back home. I guess you always have to ask yourself, what makes you happier, the things you miss from back home, or the female in your bed here, and the world she and you share here? If you go back there, what you have here is gone. One way or the other, you are going to lose something. So which will you be sorrier to lose?

I want both. Why does Vieve say she can't come with me?

She hasn't told you?

No, she just says she can't.

Kenneth, I know why, but the fact that she has not told you puts me in a bad place. I will not lie to you, and I cannot break a promise to Vieve. Is it OK if I leave you here on the terrace for a minute or two and speak with your girl, or are you willing to accept my statement when I tell you that I know why and that she is right? She really can't.

Really?

Kenneth, it is not possible, not for a long while.

Damn. So she isn't just being difficult?

She's not. She simply can't. You're going to have to choose.

Do you like the food here?

Some. It depends on who's cooking. I don't like everything cooked in the States, and I bet you don't either. That's why when you go into a restaurant, they hand you a menu, so you can choose what you want to eat. At home, you cook what you want. It's the same here. Of course, here, Vieve does not have a normal home and so I guess you are eating out a bunch.

Yeh. I mean the food we had here last week... that was good. But we go to places and sometimes I can't stand it. When Vieve cooks something, it ain't great either.

Not all Filipinos are good cooks or even know how to cook. In this house, Jecim is the best cook. Jezryl isn't good at it at all. If you chose to stay you can get a house to live in and maybe a maid who can cook. The cost of a maid is under fifty bucks a month, plus room and board. You can even teach a good one how to make some American dishes.

How about TV? You miss that, right?

You can get some US programs here. If I wanted it, I think I could get a little at least. It comes in via cable or satellite. I think the cost is about twenty-five bucks a month. In truth, I never watched that much TV in the States. So it's not a big thing for me now. Each of us is different that way.

You drive here?

Yes. It's easy to get a Philippine driver's license and you can drive on your US one for 90 days after you arrive³⁵. New cars cost close to what they cost in the States, for comparable vehicle, but used ones cost more than comparable ones in the States.

So, if I stay I should buy a new one?

I am not saying that. I am just telling you how much things cost. What I am saying is that some of the things that aren't working for you are because you have not chosen to settle in. Clearly not all things would be better if you settle,

³⁵ In 2016 the Philippine law on this changed to the extent that getting a Philippine driver's license is no longer available to those with extended stay tourist visas. You now need a SRRV, 13A, or special work related visa to obtain a Philippine driver's license. Those who already have a Philippines driver's license are grandfathered in.

but some, or even many will be. Housing, food and transportation issues change when you settle in, so long as you have income.

But no Walmart. No Taco Bell. No Waffle House.

True. But in the US there are no palengkes, no street vendors selling banana-Q or pork BBQ on skewers. There are trade-offs. And in the US there is no Vieve. I can't be sure, but I am willing to bet you will never, in the USA, have a mate even close to Vieve.

He laughs. He's well aware that the last thing is true enough. He shakes his head. He's just not sure what to do. I'm sure as hell not a mind reader, but my guess is that he'll go back to the USA. This place is too much of a change for him.

A reversal of fortune

Vieve is probably going to be disappointed and that has me surprised. She knows to not get emotionally invested in her Johns.

It has Jelou confused.

It has Jezryl considering future options for her friend.

Jecim and Myra are taking it all in with a touch of disbelief. They are not trusting what they are seeing and are waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It appears that all the gals talked to Vieve while I was talking to Kenneth.

We all see Vieve as a prostitute/grifter. They like her, but understand what she is about. She likes the game of what she can get from men and is intrigued by what the next one might have to offer. Kenneth is good for a regular meal three times a day, a clean place to sleep, some new clothing and new shoes, but that is pretty much all it is, while he is here on a tourist visa. He isn't outrageously wealthy, though he clearly has more than enough money to make things work for her. He isn't particularly good looking or bright. He's just another John, so why is she trying so hard to hold on to him?

For Jezryl, it is a sign that she might fit in here if Kenneth leaves. I think she's wrong on that scale. She has Kenneth all to herself and he does what she wants. Other than the fact that he might leave, while he is here, for the most part she gets to control what happens, and that does not match how it works here in this house.

For Jelou, she sees a fellow traveler who is ready to throw in the towel at a time that makes no sense to her. Vieve is Jelou's model of where she, Jelou, wants to be... or at least so Jelou thought until today. Our depressed youngster is being told by Vieve's actions that there may be a problem with her dream. But what the problem is, is not at all clear.

Jecim and Myra are not fooled at all. They knew all along that at some point Vieve was going to figure out that safety and stability were more important than is the game. However, they also know, Vieve needs to be in control, and is addicted to the game itself. Those two things are going to trip her up, by their estimation, over and over again. It is why they are convinced that Vieve is wrong for us and why she will probably end up like her mother, an old, worn-out whore with children from unknown fathers.

It just goes to show how desire, and aspiration can trip you up. You see what you want to see and ignore the rest. My two who have neither desire nor aspiration in play right now, see things the most clearly. Neither Myra nor Jecim want to control things as much as they want to be sheltered, safe, and cared for. They might call it love. I clearly do not. But, the way they see it, needing to be in control kills off the ability to truly love.

That does not make these two my resident sages. When it comes to Alida, Myra is sure as hell no sage. If there was a reason for Jecim to need someone, she would likely be as useless.

Jezryl awaits the results. For her, either Kenneth stays and at least Vieve is safe and stable, or she is free to come to us. It isn't going to happen, but there is no way to explain it to Jezryl right now.

Jelou is just more depressed. She just doesn't understand what is happening to her world or the one she aspires to reenter.

I am spending zero time on the matter. My guess is Kenneth leaves, but that is only because the greater number of guys do just that. This place does not work for them. And so, I am not reading Kenneth's mind, I simply lump him in with the mass of other guys. He just doesn't matter to me.

As the week moves on, I am just about finished with my large piece of burl. The very last chunk of wood is in my hands.

There is little to worry about here in the house. None of the girls are giving me a problem. Yes, they are dour and there is not much joy in them at the moment. But I stay with the wood and do not engage with them, protecting myself from the matter.

Each of my three comes to my bed. Jelou doesn't and that is fine with me. I'm not a stallion. At 67 I certainly show my age, but I have enough for any one of them on any particular night and when each of them is alone with me, the tensions they feel about other things, it seems to me, are left in the hall, outside the bedroom door.

Jecim is, if no younger than Jezryl, the most innocent in many ways. I'm the only man she has ever been with. She hasn't the techniques that the other two have, but I really don't care. When she is with me, she is a joy. I think I kiss her more, and hold her more after sex. The sex itself is pretty traditional stuff. Her body is tiny, as are they all, and I worry about squashing them. But I think I am even more careful with Jecim.

She never complains about our time together. She does have orgasms. So I must be doing something right.

On occasion there are two of them with me in one night. Those times things are a little more interesting in ways. But when I am with Jecim alone, I enjoy her more than I can express.

She was the first here, and though she wasn't the first one I fucked, of these three, she was the only virgin. I think for that reason, she will always be special to me.

I am with her tonight. There is no seduction. We shower and get into bed. She fakes being asleep and fakes snoring. But Jecim doesn't really snore and so I start laughing. Laughing turns into tickling and wrestling. Wrestling turns into foreplay. Foreplay turns into a hot lovemaking that, even before I enter her, brings her three orgasms.

By the time I mount her, she is dripping wet and demanding completion from me. Sliding into her requires no effort at all. She is well primed. I run in all the way and bottom out, bringing on verbal encouragement. *Yes! Again! Yes, hard! Yes!*

Beneath me is a partner. This is her time as much as it is mine. She wants and needs it. She isn't the only girl I am fucking in this

house, but that is of no significance to her. I am her man and I am doing what she needs me to do without reservation.

We don't fuck deep into the night. But we fuck long enough for two more of her orgasms. I feel her cunt contract on my dick. I feel her release her womanly liquids bathing my dick, in her hot passion, before I cum enough for her to complain I am leaking out of her and making a mess of the bed.

It is this way with one or another of the girls, many nights. But it is at night, before bed. Our lives are not wall to wall sex. How can they be? We are living real lives. Myra works between five and six days a week. Jelou has school five days a week and often a Saturday session before tests. The house is a big one and it really takes two to keep the place clean, to shop and to cook for all.

So most of the week, all of them are busy most of the day. I spend my days on the terrace with my wood.

This is no fantasy sex dream. This is real life. Sure, having three mistresses is a fantasy all in its own right, but it is a fantasy tempered by how the real world works.

In truth, there are many households with the same complement of females in it but where the man is only fucking one of them. The others are real maids, or daughters, or in-laws. In those homes, it may well be a wife, two maids, and a sister-in-law, or the mother-in-law, or a daughter... So the number of females in my home is no big deal. The fact that I am fucking three of them is a little unusual. But I am sure I am not the only one. I can't be, and the way this house works during the daytime is probably no different from many other homes here. There are other sixteen-year-old maids.

It may not be technically legal, but it is not uncommon.

I guess they are increasing the school years to add eleventh and twelfth grades, but currently school ends at tenth grade and that means a sixteen-year-old is a high school graduate. If she isn't going on to college, being a maid may be a good job.

So fuck her or not, such a maid will often be in the home.

Another week passes, as my weeks do. Sweet, quiet days, pleasant evenings, and loving nights. There is nothing to report for a good eight days. But on the eighth day, Ermei comes to our home, quite unexpectedly. It is mid-morning. Myra is working and Jelou is in school. Both Jezryl and Jecim are inside the house. I'm the only one outside when she comes to the gate. Seeing her, I tell her to enter.

Good morning, Sir.

Good Morning Ermei. Why've you come?

I not know what to do. I embarrassed.

I see. It is too embarrassing to tell your family, but not too embarrassing to tell me? Is that correct?

Yes Sir. It true.

OK, so what is it?

My husband, Sir. He take my niece as a maid. She seventeen. He fucking her. Maybe he get her pregnant!

Are you fucking him?

No! I not want to be pregnant. I tell you that last time.

What did I tell you to do last time?

You say, I get birth control and fuck my husband.

But you didn't do it. So why bother to come back here. One good reason he is fucking her is because you won't.

I no want that. What I do?

Nothing. Your niece is only doing what you refuse to do. I guess you can fuck your niece. But I am not sure how that helps you.

Maybe I live here with Jelou. My niece take care of the children and my husband.

Really? For Christ's sake! No. For a number of reasons, no. No, you are not allowed to be with Jelou. If you try I will contact the PNP. Second, you may not have sex with any of my other girls, unless I have sex with you and I will make

you pregnant. Go home, Ermei. Fuck your husband. Fuck him while your niece is there.

Why you mean to me?

Ermei you came to me. I didn't come to you. Jelou took advantage of your sexual rules. If you were more willing with your husband, she might still have tried some things, and maybe you would have kept the love of your husband and you most certainly would not be here now. I am not being mean to you. You are doing things that only hurt you. And then you come to me and say, 'Why am I in pain?' Am I to lie to you and say it is not your doing? I don't lie. Go to him and give your husband the love from you he needs. It is too late now to stop your niece, but at least you won't lose your husband. . . . If you come back here again like you did today. I will take you inside and rape you, before giving you to Myra and Jecim. And when they are done I will rape you again and again until you are pregnant. Are we clear?

Yes, Sir. I go now.

Good. Good-bye Ermei.

She is gone, long before it is time for lunch. My girls do not know of Ermei's visit and there is no reason to tell them. I keep my mouth shut about what has happened, but they have information for me. Kenneth has left the Philippines. Vieve is bummed out. We can expect her for supper.

Clearly, Jezryl is happy. Equally clearly Jecim is not. She looks at me in a way that suggests to me, she is trying to learn what my intentions might be. She might think Vieve is a bad bet for us, but she doesn't know how I see it.

I have no reason to tip my hand in any direction. For me, it is only a friend coming for supper and nothing more. Additionally, I don't know if she feels I helped or hurt her *vis a vis* Kenneth, when I spoke with him last time. Jecim will just have to be patient a little longer.

The afternoon passes in its normal quiet peaceful manner. Myra has returned from work and Jelou is back from school. All five of us are assembled and are about ready to sit down to supper when

Vieve arrives, dressed a bit more nicely than normal and with an unreadable composure. She greets all nicely, if a bit formally, and gives me an especially warm but equally formal greeting.

We sit for supper and I start up by telling Vieve that I have learned just this afternoon that Kenneth has left. *I don't know if this was something you wanted to happen, or not. Clearly, last time, you were hoping he would stay.*

Rolie, he leave yesterday. I sad he leave. Better if he stay. I know you try to help. He tell me you say it good to stay. It be OK for him. Yes he tell me this. Thank you for that. But he talk to his sister and then he say to me, why I not come to the USA. I say I cannot do this. He say why that? I tell him truth I sixteen. He get very angry and he decide he will go.

I'm sorry it didn't work the way you wanted.

It OK, maybe I learn a lesson. It better to be safe and stable. Game fun but I scared too much. I not scared when I with Kenneth. I not shake any when I with him. Jezryl... you know this?

Know what, friend? You ask if I shake when I that way?

No, silly. I know you shake. We all see it! You know I shake?

No.

It true. I do. Maybe I hide it good. But I shake. I think it normal to feel this way. I not know what it like to not shake. I shake all my life with my mother. But with Kenneth, I not shake. I feel good. And then Kenneth say he will leave and I shake. I shake bad. That when we come here. Rolie talk to Kenneth and it better. He not leaving. Shaking, it stop. Then we have the fight and shaking it start again. I shaking now. I not care what Kenneth want. I do what he want. Maybe he stupid. I not care. I safe. I do what he want. I feel good. I alone, I shake again. Better to not shake. Jezryl, you shake now?

No, friend. I not shake. It gone. Maybe I bored sometimes. Maybe there no excitement sometimes, but there is no shake. I am happy.

Jelou has been a quiet spectator but something is chewing on her. I can see it. I give her a head nod. I am in a way suggesting to her, 'go ahead, ask.'

She does, *Ate*³⁶, *what you mean shake?*

You cold inside, feel a shiver. Stomach hurt. That it.

You not feel that anymore?

Yes, now I do. It back now. Not when with Kenneth. But now? Yes, now. I alone again. I am this way again. When I find a man, in the game, I get warm, I not shiver, but the stomach, it still hurts. I always think... how long, how much, what I need to do? What if he hurt me? When I with Kenneth, I not think these things. If I eighteen, it be OK. I go with him to the USA. But now, nothing.

Myra looks over at Jelou. *Child, you shake? You shake like Vieve?*

Jelou is crying. Jezryl is beyond angry. She has hit the furious button. She stands up, points a finger at her younger sister and explodes. *You have everything Vieve needs to be happy and you shake? Why that, stupid? Why? What wrong with you? You safe here. Always safe! No problem. Never problem! Why you shake?*

He not take me. He not make me his. I not safe like you.

Fool! He tell you! You ask and he take you to bed. Why you not ask?

Why he not want me? Why I ask? If a man want you, he take.

What age you, stupid?

You know! Fourteen!

You not think he worried you too young? Maybe he think this!

Why? Other not care. Why he care?

Because he Rolie. Ask to be in his bed and see what happen.

No!

Why?

He not want me!

³⁶ Older sister, or older respected female. [Pronounced: ah-TEH]

If he want you, you think you not shake anymore?

How I know? She is sobbing... How I know? ... How I know?

I have heard enough. A perfectly nice supper is now a table of misery. And clearly I need to resolve a number of things and see where it takes us.

Jelou. Stop crying. You are to come to my bed tonight, unless you are having your period. You have an IUD so we don't need to hassle with condoms. Be in my room by nine. Clear?

Yes, Sir.

Good, and you can expect to be in my bed on a regular basis from now on. You are now one of my girls. Clear?

Really?

Yes.

OK. Yes, clear, Sir.

Good. Now for you Vieve. You asked to enter this house before. Are you asking again?

Yes.

Are you sure, or do you need some time to get over Kenneth?

I am sure.

Last time you said you still wanted to play the game. If you come here, you can't do that. It's over. Are you sure you will be OK with that?

Yes.

You said once that you have sisters. If I ask you to join me, are you going to tell me to bring another sister too?

No.

Are you sure?

Yes. My sister, she also a prostitute. She twenty-two. She mean and do shabu³⁷. I not friend to her.

Then I invite you to enter my home and my bed forever, under these terms. No sex with anyone here, until you have been to a doctor, tested for all STD's and have a clean bill of health. Then you enter into my bed and beds of the others in this house and no one else's bed, ever. There are to be no problems with the others in this house. You will not get special treatment. All you girls are equals here. You must protect them and they will protect you. Do you accept?

Yes! Yes!

Anyone have a problem?

No one does.

³⁷ Pills with a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine prevalent throughout Asia

Doing wrong, doing right

It is nine in the evening. Jelou is here.

How old are you? I am sixty-seven. This kid is fourteen. There is not one sane reason why she should be in this room, unless she needs a raise in her allowance, or to explain why she wants to stay out with her friends tonight, or maybe try to convince me that a bad report card really isn't her fault.

No, not one sane reason. The reason isn't sane, but it is real, and honest, thought out, and compelling. She needs to feel loved, desired, and bound to me, to feel safe. To feel that she has reached final refuge in her journey from her earliest years and memories.

To her, that means sex. For her, sex is the thing that lies as bedrock. Everything else is artifice. People will lie for it. Pay for it. Beg for it. Steal for it. And the only time it doesn't matter is when someone is so strung out and fucked up on drugs that they are lost to the world.

If I view Jezryl as damaged, then I must see Jelou as damaged even more. It seems there was a time in Jezryl's early life when she experienced some normative care and mothering. But the two years that separate these two girls contains a rift on motherly concern and affection that defies simple understanding. Jelou has more in common with Vieve than she does with her older sister in this regard.

I missed that. Jezryl missed it. Myra and Jecim are so far from it as to be unable to connect with it.

Vieve and Jelou saw their distorted world as real, necessary, and immutable to change. Both did. They saw themselves as the only ones who could see the raw truth of the world, while the rest of us are blind. The curtains have been pulled back for them. They can see through to the 'reality' of their lives. That 'reality' was what gives them the shakes. They saw the shakes as the obvious and

understandable reaction and response to ‘reality.’ It was. It was the reality of damaged lives.

But Vieve’s time with Kenneth, that simple, unaffected, and uncomplicated man, did more than show Vieve that what she was seeing was not the reality of normal life, but only a slice of the passions humans feel. It showed Vieve what can be found attached to that passion when things are in balance. It is the medicine that cures the shakes.

The only question is, is the addiction to the game too strong?

Only Vieve’s experience, expressed, discussed, dissected in detail at the supper table tonight, constituted sufficient illumination for Jelou to recognize, in her own being, the truth she had no idea existed outside her cramped view of her world. She needed to understand what was happening to Vieve to find a path for herself.

The first time I was with Jelou, it was to violently disarm her, to strip from her the tools, the weapons, she used to protect herself, and maintain a solitary and insulated control of all around her.

That had to happen. Possibly the pain, isolation, and depression that followed, was necessary as well. She needed the earth to be turned by the hard and insistent edge of the plow before a new seed, placed in tilled ground, might have a chance to sprout.

Jelou needs to become addicted to the need for, and surrounded by, caring intimacy. She may well call it love. I know better. I had it with Charline, that intimacy, only to eventually be betrayed. I recreated it with Jecim, and Jezryl, and Myra. It is not love, but real intimacy is the needed tonic for our hearts and brains. We all need it.

Whether I am the long term answer for Jelou, or the training ground before she is ready, in a more healthy way, to move on, or am just an interlude, only to be followed by setbacks, as she slides back to that world of fear, can be known only in hindsight.

And so now, here, in this bedroom, I will take a fourteen-year-old, not because I want to, I do not, but rather because I must. I must,

gently but not too gently, bring her to me, enter her, care for her, cum in her, and hold her tight, so as to make sure she does not feel discarded following the act of completion. This is not the normal coupling I want to do, and did just last night, with Jezryl.

Jezryl and I are at peace with each other. We trust each other, and enjoy the bond between us.

None of that exists here. Here now, is a girl, by all rights in the world of decency, not yet fully aware. But she is not the product of a decent world. She is not simply wounded. She is not stunted. She has grown in poisoned soil. Her roots need a different earth in which to allow her to truly grow, good and strong.

‘Do-gooders’ think that putting her in good soil is the answer. It is not. Oh, the recipients will mouth the praise for those who have ‘saved them.’ But once the cameras have moved away and those do-gooders move on to their next act of blessed saving, those damaged like Jelou and Vieve, who have been saved, get the shakes, the fear, and all that comes with it. The results are a mix, but none live truly happy lives inside their own skins. Maybe it works with the likes of a Jezryl. Possibly it does. But not with a Jelou. And it is the Jelou’s of the world who are most at need.

I take the girl in my arms. I tilt her head up, by her chin, and kiss her, without tongue.

In my head, I know she needs to feel my need. In my head I know she is a fourteen-year-old and that I have no business being with her. In my head, I know she is cute. In my head, I don’t want to be with her.

In my heart, it feels wrong. In my heart it feels perverted.

And yet... and yet... I am here. She is standing here. Her arms are around me. My arms are around her. Her lips seek mine, as mine seek hers. Her small body is encompassed by mine, willingly, happily, and seemingly with real need.

I know I shouldn’t. I know I must.

At least she will not carry a child. The IUD Myra assisted in her getting, will prevent that.

Yes, she is cute. Will she be fat and ugly by the time she turns thirty, or even twenty-five? Does that matter?

Her right hand has moved down to my dick. She is rubbing it, through my clothing. Damn, it feels good.

I squeeze her ass, through her shorts. She presses her crotch against my thigh and, in a little up and down motion, runs her clothed cunt against my leg, seeking stimulation.

The kisses are more intense. Her tongue invades my mouth. Her left hand, the one not squeezing my dick, is on the back of my head. Her fingers entwined in my hair, and pulling my head to tilt forward toward hers.

As she grinds her cunt into me, she whimpers, and grunts. She is giving ample evidence of her need. I lift her up and carry her to the bed. She voices approval of the act, and spreads her legs for me to gain access to her clothed body. But instead I unbutton and unzip the shorts. She brings her legs together and I remove shorts and panties. I pull her up by her arms, pulling her top up and over her head. Before I can get to it, she removes her bra and tosses it across the room.

I am about to remove my clothing but she is reaching up and pulling me down, on to her small frame.

I feel more than her physical presence. I feel her need, her passionate desire. This small, cute, teen is doing all she can to make sure I feel every ounce of her exquisitely expressed desire. With one hand she is holding me close. With the other, she is unbuttoning my slacks, sliding the zipper down, pushing the slacks and boxers down over my ass.

She reaches back up and around to find my dick. It is rigid. She sighs, slides around a bit below me, placing her cunt just where it needs to be and encourages me to enter her.

Is she wet? I have no way of knowing if she is ready. I have not touched her cunt. But I slide, without difficulty, deep into a tight, hot, and wet cunt. Deep, and deeper still. Bone against bone, we meet. She moans a sound of contentment.

We move a little bit. A little out and back... not much. She holds me deep in her and wiggles around with me fully inserted. She sighs.

Still fully inserted, I lean in for a real kiss. She responds and grabs my head.

Still kissing, I find a nipple with my fingers and gently play with the tip of it.

Jelou just about comes unglued as she bucks up into me, pulls her head back and wails as her cunt spasms on my dick.

I pull out a bit and plunge back in hard, once, twice, and again, all the while playing with that nipple. And off she goes again.

I repeat the scenario again and she bucks up screaming, *Cum! Cum! Cum!*

I start jackhammering her cunt. She's wailing, and grunting, until my balls send the message and my cum flows into her.

We are quiet. Our faces are side by side. Mine face down and her face up. I am still over her. I feel wetness on my cheek. She is crying.

Are you OK?

Yes! Yes! I am OK. Very OK.

Why're you crying?

I think, because I am happy. Maybe? Yes. That why. Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Rolie.

I move off to her side and she rolls on top of me, kissing my nose, my brow, my cheeks, my ears. She's giggling, murmuring, sighing. Her wet cunt oozing fluids on to my belly all the time.

Rolie, it OK if I put some of my clothing in those drawers?

She is pointing to a chest of drawers on the far side of the room. Charline's stuff used to be there, but those drawers have been empty since she left. Jelou knows this as she has helped clean the house and that includes the bedroom.

I know why she is asking and I guess I see no reason why not to allow it.

Of course. This is your home. That will be fine.

She moves down on me a little bit, puts her head on my chest and cries anew.

Rolie?

Yes?

I not shaking.

Good. Very good... I am glad you are home now. Now let's go to sleep in our bed. It's good to be home. See?

Yes. It good.

We sleep.

I awaken to kisses. Little kisses... on my forehead, on my eyelids, on my cheeks. As it becomes clear that I am awakening, giggles accompany the kisses. A tongue licks my right temple. Gentle teeth nip the end of my nose. Hot breath falls on my face followed by more kisses.

My eyes are still closed, but I am very much awake. *Good morning, Jelou.*

Good morning, Rolie. Who take shower first?

Up to you. If you want to sleep for a while longer, stay here in bed.

No, silly, I awake. It OK if I take shower now?

Yes. It's fine.

Good, then I dress and start moving things to the drawers here!

This is a Sunday and my morning proceeds pretty much normally from that point on for the next couple of hours, before... Jecim, Jezryl, Myra, and Vieve all descend on me, out on the terrace.

They all sit there, waiting for me to acknowledge them.

Yes?

It is Jecim who is the spokesperson for those assembled.

What happen?

Hub? What do you mean?

What happen with Jelou?

You know what happened. I took her to my bed last night.

That not all, we think.

Why? What is the problem?

No problem. You want our clothing in your room?

Ab, Jelou asked permission to put some things in a drawer. I said OK.

That all?

I am not sure what you are asking. Is there something else happening?

All our clothing? All us?

Hub?

She say we all put things in the drawers. We all yours. Vieve too. You say this?

No. We didn't talk about it. But... I am not opposed to it.

I am not opposed to it at all. She wants to mark her turf, but to do it without the others doing it might well seem wrong in her eyes. She knows she is the youngest and most junior. She needs all to mark the turf too. Young though she is, she sees herself as part of a group, of my group. She is a part. That was the entire purpose of my being with her last night. To that extent, her need to equality in membership makes perfect sense.

The girls are looking at me. I think they are surprised by my response. *I think Jelou needs you to join her in this, so that you do not see her as stepping on your toes. There are many empty drawers in my room. I don't see why you don't make use of them. And, yes, Vieve, I include you in this. Once we have a doctor's clearance for you, you will be just as much a part as the others. ... But I have a serious request. Please no one else.*

Laughter ensues among two.

Vieve is not laughing. She is crying, much as Jelou cried last night. And for a brief moment I think of Kenneth. Vieve owes him a great deal. It is something he will never know.

A cloud forms over Myra's face. She desperately wants Alida to join her here. It just isn't going to happen. To add her, means adding another young girl and not one who has lived the life that Jelou has lived. She has grown up as anyone would want a young girl to grow into womanhood. That girl is too young and this is not the place for her. I know it. Myra must know it. So what am I to do with Myra? Does she need to leave us?

She says she isn't going anywhere. But how long will that resolve last? Maybe if she can hold out long enough for Alida's daughter to leave home... but this is the Philippines. Her daughter may never really 'leave home.' Most 'homes' are multi-generational.

It is the case that Jecim's multi-generation home does exist and she is close to it. She is here, as the youngest, in a weird match her mother and uncle engineered. If she had not been the first, I doubt I would have allowed it. If she had not been the first, I doubt they would have proposed it and she might well have lived in that multi-generational home all her life.

Jezryl was a whore and the child of a dysfunctional broken home, as are Jelou and Vieve.

Only Myra is like Jecim, a product of a sound, functioning family, and she is here, once again as the youngest. She, a free spirit who was allowed to fly more free than were her older siblings. Still, her need to bring her older sister into this with her, creates problems. It is a need for family that is so basic to the meaning of being Filipino

that I just don't see any resolution except for Myra to leave us. I think Myra is reading my mind, or maybe the expression on my face.

Rolie, it OK if we put a guest house on the property?

The term "guest house" can refer to a nipa hut, also called a bahay kubo. It is a hut made of bamboo, rattan and has a thatched grass roof. There can be a room or two inside it and can accommodate a bed or two.

Why would I want to, Myra?

My sister, she can live in it with her daughter. She not in the house. Her daughter not in the house, but I see them every day. You not require sex with Jecim when she come here. She ask for this.

Yes, that is true.

So you not really need sex with Alida. Alida and her daughter not be together in the house, so no problem. See?

Alida wants sex, so I don't get that at all. What she doesn't want is sex with the girls. Plus, just because your niece's bed is not in the house, solves no problem that I can see. There is too much sexual activity on this property for your niece to live here.

Rolie, my sister and niece visit here. You allow this. Jelou is here. My niece is with Jelou. What the difference?

Are you telling me that Jelou has introduced your niece to sex?

I not know. I ask, what the difference?

I see. Jezryl, when those two come to visit next time, I ask that you visit with Myra's niece and see if there has been any influence from Jelou on this girl. OK?

Yes, OK. I do it.

If there has been, then, Myra, your niece must not come here again.

Myra screams. She screams at me. Jecim and Jezryl grab her, and pull her back into the house, away from me. Vieve is just sitting

here. The tears have ended. She is just looking at me. It is a curious look.

You right, Rolie. She wrong. You right.

She needs to be with her sister.

She need this. It true. But not here. I think, not here. You right. Why that?

Why what, Vieve?

Why you not want to fuck the young girl, you fuck Jelou.

Yes, I'm doing a bad thing when I fuck Jelou. I agree. But, Jelou needs it. She's like you in many ways. She's seen sex from a very early age. I cannot change that for her, just as I cannot change what happened to you. Both of you were damaged and need to heal. That can happen here, but you and Jelou are unable to heal without sex. It is part of who you are now. ... Myra's niece is not the same. Since she doesn't need sex to get healthy, I see no reason to damage her.

Yes, it true. I damaged. So you do wrong with Jelou, because you must, to do right?

Yes, I guess you can say that.

Family dynamics

The house is not a joyful one. Four are OK, but somber. One is miserable.

Living alone, is simply a bit lonely most of the time and crushingly lonely on occasion.

Living with a wife is putting your entire life in the hands of another and that, in retrospect, is a dumb thing to do, at least it was for me.

Living with mistresses eschews the loneliness. There is no crushing loneliness, ever. But it is not all happiness and roses either. Right now is a prime example. There is no way to make all of these gals happy all the time and there are times when it is just impossible to make one happy at all.

The last time it was Jelou who was souring the punch bowl for all. Now it's Myra who is depressing us.

Must I make her miserable? Must I tell her, 'no'?

No, I **could** violate my own concept of right and wrong. I could put a very young teen into a cauldron of sexual congress and hope for the best. But it would likely screw the kid up for life. Why would I want to risk that? I would not have done it with Jelou, but she was hardly an innocent.

In my estimation Myra and Alida are being selfish and showing a disregard for the long term welfare of the child. But maybe it's not even Alida. Maybe it's just Myra. I need to speak with Alida again.

I send her a text suggesting we talk. I get a cryptic message back saying she is busy and will get back to me.

Right now, I am sitting in the Sala with my brandy and jazz. Nina Simone is singing *Mood Indigo*. Jezryl, Vieve, and Jecim are playing Tong-Its and devouring chips. Myra is doing something on her phone. I don't know what exactly, but she looks like she might be using Facebook Messenger. We have finished supper and the kitchen is clean.

Life is not an all-day orgy. Nor is it filled with action like a Hollywood movie. How could it be? We live something of normal lives in many ways. One of them is a school girl. One works six days a week. Three function as housekeepers and it keeps them busy throughout the week, though not as much as when there were just two. My car gets washed more often now, and the garden is being attended to more these days.

This is not a sex den. It is a home. A place to find safety, caring, and stability. And that remains true, even if there is a cloud hanging over us. Things may not be uproariously fun filled right now, but no one is at risk. Life continues on.

The gals have in the past couple of weeks, placed personal items in drawers in my bedroom. The choice of what to put in has been a personal one for each of them. The fact that all have done so has made Jelou very happy. Even Vieve has placed things in the room, though I have not been with her yet.

The health checkup I sent Vieve to get, didn't reveal anything critical, but she did have some small things that needed attention and we have put off sexual congress until her doc gives her a clean bill of health. I expect she will get that in a couple of days. She knows I am waiting for her. I have been teasing her. She likes it.

When I initially sent her away, before she met Kenneth, I thought she would never have a place here. I was wrong.

The brandy in my glass, well it is a snifter, but that sounds pretty pretentious at the moment, is nice and warm, but not hot. The flavors and aroma are amazing. I just can't fathom why all the Filipinos I know take it over ice. It makes no sense.

Anyway, I am enjoying it, and the music. Jelou sits down next to me, but on the floor. She is not saying a word. She rests her head against my leg. One of her hands begins stroking the inside of my thigh and calf. So now, as I sit on this comfortable chair, drinking my brandy and listening to Cyrus Chestnut playing *Grandmama's Blues*, this young girl leans on me and caresses my leg.

I have just been thinking that this place is not a sex den and then Jelou comes over to me as if to argue the point in a fairly convincing manner.

OK, so maybe a caress is not sex, but it sure is sweet and sexy. No one else is taking any notice. Not that they should. My hand rests on Jelou's head, my fingers play with her hair. My head lolls back with eyes closed, on the chair's high cushioned back.

I am thinking that I need to be careful with this one. I suspect she is attaching to me in a manner that might make no sense to anyone but her, but may be incredibly intense, nevertheless. If so, I need to take care not to break her heart. I owe that to her. Monogamy or not, things happen in life. This is one I sure as hell didn't expect.

I'm drifting now. An intensely rhythmic Afrocuban piece by Mario Bauza called *El Manisero* is playing. I'm swaying to it in my head. I feel my zipper being pulled down and my slacks unbuttoned. I ignore it.

Jelou has fished my limp dick out of my boxers, which offers little resistance and no obstacle. She is stroking me, gently and now slowly as Ernie Walls' sax cries out sweetly and slowly, the tune, *Company*.

There are moments, you just really do ask yourself, can life really get any better than this? I am not sure it can. Jelou has her small hands on me. They are warm, soft, caring, and comforting. I feel warmth that cannot be from her hands.

Ah, it isn't. I sense her lips graze my dick. They barely touch. It is playful. But while I was rising to the occasion before, this seems to have pushed me into a new phase. I am quickly and seriously rigid. Jelou's touch is now firmer, and more demanding.

My body is not responding to a fourteen-year-old. It is responding to Jelou, a girl who is mine and may always be that. Age is a meaningless measure now. It was a meaningless measure in some ways when I met her, but in some ways it was very much a cause of my concern. Now, it is not a matter of even casual consideration.

Jelou might be sixteen, or twenty-one, or forty-one. It makes no difference to me. I suspect it means nothing to her. She is not on the street, not needing to worry about tomorrow, or her future. She is living her future. Her stomach is no longer in knots.

No, it is not in knots, but her mouth may soon enough become a receptacle for my cum, unless she removes that mouth from the task in which it is currently engaged.

The music has moved on. I think we are listening to Brubeck's *La Paloma Azul*. Its lilting marching cadence is a pretty good match to what Jelou is doing to me right now. It's funny but my mind wanders to Chick Corea's *Spain*. Could Corea have gotten a little inspiration from the Brubeck piece? How can I be thinking about that as Jelou has me going so strongly?

Damn. I think she has decided she needs to center my attention a bit better. She has my nuts in a vise like grip and has my full attention now. She is sucking hard. I am getting close. Is this what she wants, tonight? I will be lying with her later. She is not cheating anyone else of a treat.

I decide to not worry about it. This is her choice. I will go with it. I think my brief worry has lengthened my staying power. If she expects to get me off, she will have to work a bit harder now.

She is trying but I am not so close any more. I reach down and pull her up, bring her face to mine, and bring her in for a good long kiss. I have opened my eyes and while I am kissing Jelou, I see Myra standing back but just glaring at me. I whisper in Jelou's ear that we will finish this in the bedroom later. She bites my ear and whispers back, *You better!*

Jelou is lying over me as I sit on the chair in something of a partially recumbent form. I look up at Myra, who asks, *You trying to prove a point?*

Excuse me?

You do this to show me why Alida not be here?

Ab, no. I did not encourage this. It was Jelou's decision, completely.

Talking to her back, Myra asks, *Lou why you do this?*

You want your niece to see what we do here?

She would not if you do it in the bedroom! Why you do this here?

You do things here before. Jezryl tell me this. Why everything change for you and your niece? You not like it? Why you here?

Myra storms off. I am about to speak a bit harshly to Jelou, when Jecim speaks up and says, *She right. Remember when you kick us out last time? Myra try to change things here. This the same. Jelou do right. We not do as Myra want this time. This time if someone leave, it is Myra, not us!*

Jecim is speaking loud enough for Myra to hear her. That is not by accident. Three minutes later Myra is back in the room. She walks back to me before asking, *You kicking me out?*

Do I need to?

She shakes her head and walks off.

The card players return to their game. Jelou, who is snuggled next to me, just snuggles in a little tighter. *I here because this your world. I not want it change. I not let it change. Jezryl, Vieve and Jecim, we not let it change. We make sure this is true.*

I am not sure anyone can prevent change, sweetheart. It is part of life.

No. We not allow this. You will see.

I am somewhat flummoxed. This girl has known nothing but change all her life. She has never really known stability. Why does she think she can assure what she has never known? Her desire is sweet and understandable, but completely unachievable.

Do I tell her that? No, sometimes it is best to keep the mouth firmly shut.

Eventually, Jelou and I leave the card players and Myra downstairs and enter my bedroom. My partner for the night is neither worried, nor excited. She is assured, calm, and seemingly happy. This fourteen-year-old is happy to be going to bed with a sixty-seven-year-old man. Say it like that, and it makes no sense. Say Jelou is

retiring for the evening with the man who has brought peace, safety and stability to her life and it begins to be comprehensible.

We're not in a hurry. She showers, I shower. I reenter the bedroom, and she pats the mattress next to her. Pardon me for seeing the mindset of a wife in a female so young. But she is self-assured. She knows she belongs here and that all is as it should be.

I get into bed next to her, now completely naked. She leans over and bites my earlobe before whispering, *I start where I stop before*, and she giggles, before she rearranges herself and takes me orally.

I am soft at the moment, but Jelou's attentions remedy that. Soon enough life returns to the old soldier. As it comes to attention, Jelou pulls up, and gets on hands and knees, wiggling her ass, and giggles. I don't have to be a genius to figure this out.

Getting behind her I center the old man behind the maiden and plunge in for a visit. Damn, does she ever feel good on my shaft. The feeling of intimate warmth radiates through my body. It is a feeling that never, no matter how many times I experience it, ever leaves me with any feeling other than one of, 'what took you so long to get back here?'

At this moment, I want all time to stop so that the feeling never has to end. And, at this moment, my body tells my mind that this is love. It's not, of course, but that is the lie our body tells us each and every time. It is why there are so many bad marriages, I guess. Too many times we believe the lie.

I know better, but for now, as I experience Jelou this way, this most intimate of ways, I hear my body's lie and for these precious moments, I believe the truth of it.

Once I cum, I will return to my senses, but not now. Now I am heartsick that I cannot plant a seed in this girl and hold her and our child close to me for the decades to come.

I feel me. I feel her. I feel us. Us, as one, living, breathing, and united. We drive on, experiencing a bliss as our bodies push toward culmination.

She is grunting, gripping, leaking, moaning, and slamming her bottom into me. I am grabbing her tits, her belly, her clit, grunting and growling as I slam repeatedly into her cunt.

She is small and I far larger, but it doesn't matter now. All that matters is that which we are engaged in.

The bed is shaking but the concrete floor and walls will deny the evidence to the outside world.

Now she is talking to me. *Rolie, please, please Rolie. Give it to me Rolie. Rolie, oh Rolie. Yes, yes, oh, yes, please. Now Rolie, now, please, now.*

And now it is, as I cum deep and hard inside her. I am exhausted. Spent. She wiggles her ass, *Again?* And she giggles.

I can't help but laugh which causes my dick to shake a bit and causes Jelou a momentary gasp. But I am done and I flop down next to her on my back, pulling her close to me for a kiss.

The room is silent except for the sound of the aircon.

Jelou is happy and satisfied. Satisfied not merely because she has cum and felt my cum, but because this wasn't a stolen moment. It wasn't something we need to hide and deny. It is a joyous affirmation of her membership here. It is proof of her belonging. And now, rather than needing to scurry off and act like nothing has transpired, she can relax under the sheet, next to me, secure in the knowledge that all is right with the world, even if tomorrow is a school day and one in which her schoolmates will all be virgins and have no idea of what her life is like. They don't need to know. And that is as much for their good as it is for hers. She is aware that she has grown up way too fast. She is happy that they didn't have to do so.

In no more than five minutes Jelou is asleep with an untroubled heart.

Morning is a school day and Jelou is out of the bedroom and off to school early. Myra has also gone to work by the time I am downstairs and pouring my first cup of coffee.

Roland, we argue about Myra. What you going to do?

OK, Jecim. Why are you arguing?

Me and Jezryl say you tell Myra to go. She not right here. Vieve say, you must not do this. She say Myra stay so long as she good to you and want to stay. We say, she bad to you, now. Vieve think she not.

Jecim, I know Myra is unhappy. She has made that very clear. But she hasn't changed anything here because you don't allow it. Correct?

Yes! See she bad!

No, she is unhappy. If she had succeeded in changing things, she would be bad. But she hasn't, because you three know better than to allow this. I am not happy with Myra and I think it would be better if she goes but I will not kick her out if she has not done any damage.

But she not want to go!

I know, and I am honestly confused about this. She has a job, an intact family, and so I never really understood why she was here other than the fact that she was a bit of a sexual rebel. But maybe there is more to it. I do think she enjoys girl-girl sex. Jezryl, what do you think about that?

It true. She like it. Hard to get it and have a man. So this place good for her. But she miss her sister. This a big problem for her.

I agree with that assessment. It's a big problem for her. And that means it isn't my problem. I don't want to take ownership of her issues. Let her sort it out. I will do nothing so long as she doesn't cause problems for me. If she chooses to make problems, then she has made the choice to leave but needs me to do it for her. It's a far less lethal version of 'suicide by cop.'

Look girls, all of us, each of you, will be unhappy from time to time. I can't start kicking you out because you are unhappy. That just makes no sense. We all need to have the space to know we can be unhappy and still safe. Am I clear on this point?

Vieve visibly brightens and says clearly, *Yes. Very clear. You right.*

Ah! That was the message she needed to hear, loud and unambiguously from me. She has heard it, and her faith that she is here for the right reasons has been reinforced. I can see it in her eyes as they bore into mine.

Alida, I hardly knew ya'

I enjoy my time on the terrace. I could be inside the house, but why? I live in this incredible place. Why hide inside walls? The birds are making a racket at the moment. There is a good breeze keeping me comfortable. I am concentrating on a small piece of the new chunk of Narra burl that I have acquired.

Vieve has just returned from the medical clinic and she has received a report of glowing good health. I am pleased, and she is excited.

I was to be with Jecim tonight, but as soon as Jecim is told of the medical results that decision is overturned. Vieve will be my bedmate.

Other than that piece of good news, not much has changed in the past couple of days.

Myra is still in a funk.

I can't say I see a way out of this for her and suspect she can't either. That is likely the cause of the funk. Anything I say, or do, will likely just make tensions between us worse, so I keep my mouth shut.

My cell phone chimes that I have received a text message.

Putting the knife and wood down without hurry, I retrieve the phone from the table on which it rests. The text message is from Alida. She asks if she might come and visit me, now, as Myra is at the pharmacy and might be unaware of the visit, if we don't inform her sister later.

Sensing that both her concern for discretion and the need for a meeting are called for, I agree, and enter the house to inform the others that we will have a visitor, but none are to mention that to Myra later. All agree, Jecim and Jezryl both giving me looks that tell me they see how important this meeting might well be.

Thirty minutes later Alida enters through the gate. I gesture that she should take a seat on the terrace. Jecim appears, assures Alida that

her meeting will not be reported to Myra and asks the woman if she might want some water. She does and it is fetched while we make small talk about doings in town and the progress of her daughter in school.

But now, the water has arrived and Jecim has withdrawn. Now it is time for the real reason for the visit. And yet, Alida is not speaking. Nothing. She is looking at her feet.

Did you come here to talk about what your sister wants and how you feel? Do I understand this correctly?

You make love to me before. It OK I call you Rolie?

Yes of course.

Rolie, I want you like Myra want you. She know this. If I not, maybe she not be so unhappy.

I see. But you do not want to be with the girls here. Correct?

Yes, correct. I not really want this. I do it if I must, but I not want it. Myra say you make me do it. That true?

Yes, she tells you the truth. But there is more to it. You are a mother. It is a huge problem.

Yes, my daughter. I not want her to have sex. Myra say you agree with me. You think it a bad thing for her to see such things. That true?

Yes, that's exactly right.

So why you not allow me to come and my daughter stay with her lola³⁸?

There are a number of reasons. I know this happens when a mother must leave the country and work as an OFW³⁹, but you will be in the same town. She will see you often. It will be confusing for your daughter. She will feel rejected by you. That is bad. Your mother would have to be OK with what happens in this house, fully. Your daughter will want to visit you and her lola, your mother, will be in a difficult position, whether she encourages it or is against it. I cannot

³⁸ Grandmother.

³⁹ Overseas Foreign Worker.

allow your girl to be here when nothing is going on because she will feel even more rejected not being allowed to be in a perfectly normal home. She will wonder what is wrong with her. If she sees the reason, well that is not good for the girl too. I think you agree on this last thing.

Oh, I not think of those things. But Rolie, my sister she cries because she miss me. I want to be with you. No man want me now with my child. I am alone. This not good. I not find a good job. I am too old⁴⁰. When my sister go to you, I move back with my mother. I stuck now. What I do? You like me. I know this. You like my body. I know this.

Which is more important, your happiness or your daughter's? Why don't you work as an OFW. You might find a man where you go.

I not have the school needed. I not have the skills needed. I not able to be OFW. I want happiness for both me and daughter. Why not?

Because it is probably not possible, just like being an OFW is not possible.

My sister say if I come to you and tell you these things, you will throw her out of the house. You do that now?

No. I will not. I do think she might be happier if she left here, but I am not throwing her out.

Why she be happier?

Because then she could be with you.

She not want that, she want me to be with you. She know I am lonely, unhappy. She want me happy. We both unhappy if she leave you!

I see. So what is the plan for your daughter?

None now. I think I have a plan. But you show me the plan is wrong. I not have a plan now.

I certainly don't as well. When you have a plan, you are welcome to present it to me. Until then, I see no way for you to join us.

You mean join you?

⁴⁰ She is well over 30 years of age. There is a bias against hiring women at that age. She might work as a maid, take in washing or leave to work as an OFW. Those are her only real options for employment.

No, I said 'us' and I mean it. Even if you didn't have sex with them, and you must, you would need to be part of them in all other ways. It is the only way this house runs smoothly.

But they are still children!

They are my mistresses and you will need to understand and respect that. In this house all mistresses are equal.

Oh, I not know this. It is wrong to make a child equal to adult! Yes I think this!

That seems perfectly clear to me. But regardless of how you feel, it is the way this house works and I will not change that for you. I make the rules here, you don't.

Thank you for your time today. I must go now.

Of course. Thank you for coming.

She smiles, I smile and escort her out of the gate.

Hell and damnation, that was probably not what I wanted to learn from her, but given what had transpired in the past, I guess it's no surprise. In a way, it doesn't answer anything, as it doesn't provide a way forward. But it does explain why leaving me is not an option for Myra. In fact it will cause her no end of grief from her older sister. I had seen Myra as the instigator. Maybe Myra is stuck in the middle.

Her sister is pushing an agenda and I am pushing back hard. She, by her lights, has to listen and respect her sister. She sees no choice there. But she can't do what Alida wants. In the past Alida might have seen her sister as faint hearted, and unwilling to push the point with me. Today Alida ran into a wall. It isn't her sister who is her problem, it is very much me.

I don't really know how much Myra is desperate because she really misses her and how much she is desperate because Alida is pushing her.

The meeting has engendered in me some real sorrow for Myra. I think she may be in a bind. I just don't see a way out of the bind so

long as her sister insists on what seems to me to be a demand for something that I cannot allow to happen. It may be a reasonable thing in Alida's eyes, but it is a selfish demand of hers in mine. She was riding on Myra's income to move away from her mother. Myra's exit, screwed that up. Now she wants to ride Myra's next stop of the train but she can't get a ticket to ride.

If Alida meant that much to Myra, I suspect Myra would not have jumped at the chance to join me.

The bottom line is that it's not that Alida can't feed her daughter. She is not experiencing any desperate situation. She just wants what she wants.

I decide to share the results of my discussion with Alida, with the three gals who are here right now. I think they need to know what I know. And so, after my lunch, I ask the three to join me on the terrace.

I go over it as well as I can. There are a number of times I need to backtrack and re-explain things, but finally all is understood.

Jecim sees the matter as insoluble, as do I. Vieve and Jezryl see it completely differently. I could say it crudely, and suggest that these two have no hearts, but that would be unfair to them and unfair to simply declare their reasoning as crap. Their reasoning might not be crap. It just leaves me way too uncomfortable.

Anyway, here is as best I can explain what they were saying without the stops and starts of the prolonged conversation.

They have come to the conclusion that Alida is a piss poor excuse for a mother. They see her as a bitch who is used to bullying to get what she wants, and that probably didn't work out well with the guy who got her pregnant. But it is her modus operandi. Her daughter is probably already fucked up in a way that has nothing to do with a healthy view of sex. So I should stop pissing and moaning about protecting the kid from the debauched lifestyle we lead here. Instead I should be more concerned with interfering with the messed up worldview the kid is likely getting now. Further, as Alida doesn't know how to play well with others, and on this point,

they reference that she saw them as kids she could ignore, she won't last here anyway.

I have any number of problems with this logic. What happens to the kid when the mother is given the boot? Won't it come back to injure us? Why fuck the daughter up in two different ways? Isn't being fucked up in one way quite enough?

I think it is fair to say that they take umbrage toward me suggesting that their lives were fucked up. I try to explain that for the two of them it was before they joined me and the folks that did it were very much at fault. And I point out that they know damned well they were fucked over by life. So knock it off.

At which point they rightly ask, given that, why would the daughter be fucked up if she joined us? We, they say, are good well-meaning folks who just like sex. What's wrong with that? They basically ask, am I saying that sweet loving is wrong?

I can't say it's wrong, based on the age of the kid, without getting into deep water related to Jelou. I know it is wrong, but they don't. If Myra was here, she would be on my side, but she isn't. Jecim wants to be on my side but doesn't want to argue with these two. So I see no graceful exit to this discussion. It is truly a clash of world views.

However they have no answer to what we do with the daughter when the mother is required to exit our home. I suggest that once again we have reached the insoluble point. They think that an answer to the final issue will appear in due time if we corrupt the poor daughter. They didn't say corrupt, that's the way I see it. They just think that once the kid joins us, she will attach to her aunt, Myra, and maybe be OK if her mom needs to leave. Yeh, they don't call it corrupt, but that seems to me to be what it is.

I try a different line of reasoning. What if the daughter is repulsed by the attempt to bring her into our lifestyle? Vieve laughs. She suggests I don't appreciate my girls well enough. Jezryl adds her concurrence.

All are well aware that I have made it clear to all in the house that it is, 'my house, my rules.' However, it seems to me that we need to do the following: First, tell Myra that we are aware that she is stuck between the demands of her sister and my rules. We have a new appreciation of what she is struggling with. Further, that we all think her sister is a bully and will not work out well in this house... but that Jezryl and Vieve have suggested a plan. Jecim and I disagree with the plan, but she, Myra, needs to hear it, their reasons for it, and her reaction to it, before I make the final decision.

I will tell her before any of this that I am breaking a promise I made to her sister this morning, but that we have all decided it is necessary to keep us all together.

I look at Jecim, *Are you OK with this plan?*

Yes. I do not like their plan, but it right we share this with Myra and listen to her. It wrong to do anything without her.

I have no idea what Myra will say or do. She might defend her sister and get very angry with us. I guess I need to be prepared for that.

Vieve and Jezryl move off to pick up some things from the market. Jecim sits with me.

You were the first to join me. Do you think you made a mistake?

No.

OK, so what are you thinking?

Why are so many families bad?

Hub, I am not sure I understand you.

Vieve come from a bad family, correct?

Yeh, sure.

Jezryl and Jelou the same.

OK, and?

Well maybe that true for Myra and Alida too! Alida seem bad. Maybe her parents bad.

OK, so for the sake of the discussion, let's assume they are bad. I'm still not seeing the point of the question.

Four families, mine, Vieve's, Jezryl and Jelou's, and Myra's. Three bad! Three out of four. Why that?

OK, I see your question now. Most families are not messed up. But my life, and how I am wanting to live, creates a filter that allows through those with troubled backgrounds. It's a selection filter that excludes those who are from more normal families. Remember I was not inclined to accept you into my life in any way. It was your uncle who convinced me to allow it. If it were not for him, you would not be here. If it were not for Jezryl, I probably would not have allowed you into my bed. You are the exception. Without the accident of my being with Jezryl, it is hard to see how any of this would have played out as it has. You might never have become a mistress to me.

Do you think Myra's parents are bad?

No, I don't. Not very bad, at any rate... or maybe it is better to say, I'm not sure. But both Myra and Alida are used to controlling things. I suspect Myra learned that behavior from Alida. I have no idea if Alida learned it from their mother. When Myra tried that the first time she created a real mess. She learned she can't do that here. But it's useful to remember that when she tried, she thought she was protecting you. That was still a little like Alida, but not done to control. It had a more innocent basis.

Oh, I not see that. Yes, you are right. She a little like Alida now. But Alida selfish. Maybe Myra not that way so much. Roland, what you think Myra do?

I've no idea. None at all.

I not know too. Maybe I take all breakable things off the table before you talk tonight!

That might be a very good idea. And I get a big smile and a kiss to go with it, before she leaves the terrace and enters the house.

It is a nice kiss. One not filled with passion or a promise of a later rendezvous. It is a kiss of appreciation, one of a connection unbroken, a kiss of familial intimacy. We belong to each other.

When I return to the wood, my heart is at peace, my hands steady, and my mind uncluttered with worry. The world, as screwed up as it might well be, is turning as it must.

Jelou gets home before Myra and kisses me, much as Jecim did. She asks how my day has gone. I smile and tell her it has been an interesting day. *And how's your day gone, my sweet high school girl?*

Very well, Sir! she says with a conspiratorial smile. *Not a soul knows that I give head with the best of them and fuck like a crazy woman at night!*

Not exactly what I meant when I asked the question!

Oh, well then, we have a test coming up next week. There a special study prep on Saturday if we pay for it. And I think one of my teachers in trouble! I see the pulis⁴¹ at school today and they take her with them. We ask Jomar why they do this?

No, we won't poke our nose into this. No gossip! Please tell your teacher you will attend on Saturday. It is the usual one hundred pesos?

Yes. OK, good. I not gossip. Sorry for that.

It's OK, I am sure it was exciting.

Yes! It true. We all wonder.

I'm sure you all did. Now go inside and do your homework. I swat her gently on the butt and she takes off, into the house.

Public schools don't pay the teachers squat. So they supplement their income by making sure that only those who attend special sessions on a weekend, in which they get paid directly by students whose families can afford it, will ace the test. It sucks. It's unfair. It assures that the poorest of the poor will pretty much stay that way. But there is no way I am going to fight the system. I will make sure she has what amounts to two bucks and change to attend the session.

When we sit down for supper, Myra has yet to appear. It's happened before. A worker does not come to work and Myra pulls

⁴¹ Police.

a long day. No one is particularly worried. And we are right. She comes in, clearly tired and having worked a long shift. The others are solicitous toward her and she clearly is appreciative.

The food helps her revive a bit and she regales us with the details of what amounts to a very frustrating day. She did make some extra money today and that is not to be ignored. She comments that, as she doesn't have to pay bills here, the extra money will not disappear down a deep hole of debt. In her own way she is telling all of us she knows how lucky she is to live here.

We keep the conversation light throughout the meal. This is not the time for the serious conversation we need to engage in later.

Jelou decided that the gossip is too hard to ignore and mentions the supposed arrest at school today. She just can't control herself, it seems, and, knowing I told her to not gossip, she avoids my gaze.

But her pleasure is short lived. Myra knows what happened. The teacher's husband and two others were in a Honda Fit⁴² overtaking a large truck. The truck was in the left lane, the Honda in the right. A bus was in the opposing lane and needing to turn into the terminal. The bus driver, knowing he could make the turn before the truck reached that point in the road, crossed the lanes just as the Honda came zooming out of the truck's shadow. All in the Honda died. One of those was the teacher's husband.

Passing on the right is common here as are accidents.

⁴² A truly tiny car/

Death is too easy

The news sobers us all. As many times as we hear about a death, it's never without sadness.

The rest of supper is eaten in quiet reflection. I'm wondering if this is a good time to talk with Myra, but once again Jelou speaks seeking to learn more gossip.

Rolie, why Alida here today?

Once again she knows just enough to ask but not enough to understand the consequences of asking.

Myra puts her spoon down, takes a deep breath and asks, *My sister come here today?*

I may not have thought this is a good time, but now there are no options.

Yes, she visited with me alone today. She asked that I not speak to others about this and not tell you she came. At the time, I agreed to her request. But after she left, because of what I learned from her during that visit, I changed my mind. Jecim, Jezryl, and Vieve all know about it. We had a long discussion about the matter. I think we all agree on some things and disagree on others. I need to let you know what I learned from your sister. And you need to know the various things discussed this afternoon. Following that, I need to hear your views. Is this a good time for you, or would you rather discuss this later?

Now, please.

OK. We think you are in the middle of something and you don't know what to do. Your sister is pushing you, to push me into accepting her, without her daughter coming here. It is not that you want to be with your sister as much as she is pushing you to gain entry here. In fact, she doesn't want you back with her if it means leaving me. The truth is that she will be very angry with you if you leave here. She cares less about you and more about joining here. That is what we think. Are we wrong?

You angry with me?

No, we are not. Are we wrong?

You correct. I am sorry.

There is nothing to be sorry about. ... I spent some time telling your sister why I thought her plan about leaving her daughter with your mother is a bad plan. I won't go into all of that here. But you should know that Alida had no answer for me and didn't argue with me, once I explained it to her. But she still wants to come. However, she was not respectful of the others here, calling them children. Before she made those last comments I told her that if she could come up with a plan that would answer my reasons for saying no, I would listen to her. However, her comments about the others here, make me very unhappy with her.

Thank you for this! Yes, that is good.

Two of us here have no suggestion to help you. We don't see a way to fix it. Two of us here think they do. You need to hear from the two who think they have a plan.

What the plan?

They think your sister is not a good mother and that I am therefore not protecting your niece by saying 'no,' I am keeping her in a bad situation. They think that it would be better for us to take the child and Alida. But they think if we take Alida, I will need to tell Alida she is a trouble maker and force her to go. Two here think we will be better for your niece than is Alida. Jecim and I do not agree with this assessment. But you needed to hear their view. You need to help me decide as to what should be done, if there is anything that can be done.

You tell her to go like you tell me to go before?

Yes, but with the exception that this time it would probably only be her. I don't think the rest of you would make the mistake made last time.

You see this in her?

Yes.

More than in me?

Yes, very much more. There was a question today for which we do not have the answer. Is your mother bossy like Alida?

No. She not like Alida. She sweet. She say, Alida make her own problems being pushy.

Well, this is not the time for a final decision. It is time for you to think, to talk to the others at this table and to share feelings. No one here is against you. We are your family and we need to figure this out that way. At least, that's what I think. What do you think?

You right. Thank you. I will think about this. It OK if we not tell my sister we have this meeting?

Yes.

OK. Good. This a long and weird day. Too much in one day I think.

And that is most likely a massive understatement. But I suspect it is about to get a bit weirder. A police car has just pulled up in front of our gate, its lights flashing. All at the table are frozen in place.

Two PNP officers come to the gate entrance and I open the locked gate for them. One of the men is Jomar, though he does not have a smile on his face. The other is an older man I do not know.

All the girls are out on the terrace with me.

Good evening, Officers. How may I help you?

Jomar has taken the lead but does not signal any personal comfort with me. *Sir Roland, are you familiar with a Madam Ermei?*

He knows damned well I am! What is this about?

Yes. She was the guardian of Jelou, Jezryl's sister. We met them when Jelou came to live with us.

Have you had any other connection with the woman?

What the fuck? Is this a stage play? He sure as hell knows I have.

To what end Officer?

Sir Roland, just answer the question!

OK, well I'm sure as hell not liking this.

Yes on a number of occasions. The last time she came here I don't think I was very nice to her.

Why was that?

She was complaining that her husband was demanding sex from her and that she did not want to accommodate him.

That is an odd thing for a young Filipina wife to confide in a foreigner. Do you not agree?

Yes, it is. But she was upset. It so happens that her husband was having some sexual contact with Jelou who was only fourteen when we took her in and might have been far younger when the sexual contact started. Her husband had been receiving oral sex from the child. Madam Ermei was upset and did not want to offer her husband the oral sex. For some reason, because I was aware of what had transpired between her husband and Jelou, she may have thought it safe to speak with me.

That is a very serious allegation! Are you saying that Madam Ermei's husband raped the child?

No, Officer, I suspect that, as the child's real mother was a prostitute, she learned to manipulate men through sex. My best guess is that it was Jelou who instigated it. Still, she is a minor. So I do not think she broke any laws. Of course, you know better than I on that matter.

If this is true, then you are correct, the child cannot be held at fault. If she is good at manipulating men, why is she here?

Because I cannot be so manipulated and because her sister is here as well, to watch her behaviors.

So that is the entire sum of your contact with Madam Ermei?

I am not sure what he is digging for but I suspect in this case, more is better.

No, there was a bit more. She did not want to have normal sex with her husband because she was afraid to get pregnant. I told her to get birth control. She said it was against the teachings of the church. I was not nice to her. In my

estimation her withholding sex from her husband was unacceptable. I said that to her. I told her she had three choices. Get pregnant, get on birth control, or give her husband a mistress if she was unwilling to take care of his needs.

Sir! You think it Madam's refusal to do her duty with her husband that led to his contact with Jelou?

It is possible, but I do not know. Officer, why all these questions?

He ignores me and turns to Jelou.

Miss Jelou! Your guardian here say you give oral sex to Madam Ermei's husband. That true girl?

Opo⁴³.

He rape you?

Dili, Po.

Have you seen or been with that man since you come to live here?

Dili, Po.

Have you seen Madam Ermei since you came to live here?

Dili, Po.

Have you tried the same things with Sir Roland?

Dili, Po! Po, he a good man!

Jomar turns to a man who evidently is his superior and asks,
Superintendent, do you have any questions of the child?

The older man indicates he doesn't.

Sir Roland, Madam Ermei take her life tonight. She hang herself. She leave a note. It say her husband, Jelou and you are the cause of her pain and her death. We question her husband. He say, he tell her she need to stop holding the bible and get in his bed. He say that the reason. He say he not know why you and Jelou mentioned. We not sure he tell the truth. I think now we know he tell some of the truth. I believe you tell the truth. Superintendent, do you concur?

⁴³ Yes, Sir.

The older man signals agreement.

Officer, I am truly sorry to hear the sad news. She was a very troubled woman. Suicide is never a good answer. I think, considering the circumstances, there is no need to bring charges on the husband for what happened between Jelou and him. It seems like it was a real mess in that home.

Thank you for your suggestion, Sir, but that is the Superintendent's decision, not yours or mine.

Yes, of course. Is there anything else? Do you need to know where I was at some time?

No, this is not needed. We know this a suicide. You are not accused of murder. But your name in the letter. That why we come.

I see.

Thank you for your time. I think we done here. Good evening, Sir Roland. And Miss Jelou, see that you not get into any more trouble! You are lucky that Sir Roland take you in his home.

OK, so this is Jomar, clearly hamming it up a bit for his boss. Jelou figured this out and does the doleful respectful bit as the two PNP officers leave us.

Jecim is furious and rips into me as soon as the police car departs. Her face is red and she is damned close to throwing something at me.

Why you do that to Jelou. Why you say she seduce him?

Because I knew she would not be charged and I suspected that they had already heard the story of Jelou seducing him. I didn't see the need to get him arrested and her as a witness. That would blow up in our faces. But if she was the one, no one gets charged, it helps explain everything, and it goes no further.

Jezryl steps in front of Jecim, just about getting face to face with her, before announcing that I am right.

I turn to Jelou. *Are you angry with me?*

Me? Angry? No. You do right. It better this way. I know what you do. You see that when I answer Officer Jomar, correct?

Yes. I thought you did perfect. She may be young, but her ability to get the social cues dead on, is something that some adults I know would struggle with, far more than she does.

I think Ermei must be a very stupid woman.

I am about to respond, but Vieve beats me to it. *Lou, she double cursed. She not strong enough for many children. She not smart enough to know Priests evil. These two things, they kill her.*

I am not sure anything more needs to be said. I gather no one else does either.

We reenter the house. The girls attack the supper dishes and the kitchen. I try to relax with some jazz and a brandy, but relaxing is elusive. Ermei's suicide is more than a little disquieting. Is there something I could have done differently?

This is a day marked by needless death. Death on the roads and death by suicide. In a way, the death on the road is also a suicide/murder. It is a suicide because drivers here do things that will most assuredly kill them. It's just that, most of the time, they get away with the stupid stuff. It is, nevertheless, stupid stuff and it does kill.

Filipinos are not stupid, at least most aren't any more stupid than any other group of humanity. But to watch them drive, you would really have a hard time believing that. They take far too many risks and they take those risks for no good reason. They play Russian roulette whether it be as pedestrians, or with cars, motorcycles, tricycles, buses and trucks.

I see little difference between such road behaviors and hanging oneself. It is a reckless disregard of life. What can make a person value life so little? It can't be the promise of heaven when it comes to hanging oneself, as, according to the church suicide, is a bar from salvation. Maybe you can make the argument for the driver, but if I was Saint Peter at the Holy Gates, I would send the driver straight to Hell.

Might the driver be surprised by the trip down below? That is an interesting question. But not one I want to ask anyone around here. Too many families have family members who have been so killed.

My brandy is showing signs that I have been imbibing more than I realized, as my mind wanders down these morbid paths. I am swirling the remains in my glass when we hear a vehicle pull up outside. I hear a gasp... *They're back!* Myra is clearly freaked out.

Jecim looks out, and laughs. *Relax! It's only Uncle.*

It is truly 'only Jomar.' He doesn't wait at the gate, but let's himself in and walks through the front door, a family member needing no permission.

May I offer you a brandy?

Yes, very much yes! A difficult night, no?

Yes. It has been a sad night. I hope we did not cause you any problems.

Jomar laughs. It is a good laugh. He is wiping tears away as he shakes his head. Jecim stands at his elbow holding his brandy and afraid to give it to him until the laughter ends.

Oh my, no! I almost piss my pants when you tell us that fool woman cut her husband off! Then you told her, go home, take care your husband or find one who will! My God, man! When the Superintendent hear that, after what the husband say, oh shit, that the end of it. ... Yes, we must clear up what Jelou do with it. But you clear the husband 100%. He not so clear, but the story it match. It also match things we not tell you in the woman's letter. ... Also when you say he not rape Jelou, yes that match too. The husband not know what in the letter. Only the Superintendent and me. So it clear you tell the truth. ... When we leave Superintendent ask me, why I think the Kano⁴⁴ tell the truth like that? I tell him, this common with Kanos. They trust the police, I think. Better tell the truth. Superintendent tell me I too trusting of foreigners. But it OK this time. Then he ask why Jelou tell the truth. I tell him that you call me before. You ask what you do about the girl. I tell him I meet the girl and tell her, you do anything wrong or I find you lie even once, I make sure your

⁴⁴ American.

life is a short one. Superintendent gives me a look like, yes, that explains it. We write it up as a simple suicide and close the case. It is done. He takes a long drink of the brandy, looks at me, before ruminating on his drink. This is not Fundador. What is this? I never have such a good brandy.

Yes it is good, isn't it? It is Fundador, just not the type you buy for three hundred pesos.

So Jelou really OK here?

Yes, there are no problems. She has made a home here and we are happy with her.

Jomar calls out to Jelou. *Bata⁴⁵, come here.*

Jelou has heard the conversation and she is not worried.

Po?

I not have any problems with you now? Truly?

Opo. I be good.

Jecim agree?

Ask her Po. I think, yes.

Jomar scratches his head. Signals that the girl can leave us. He looks at me and asks, *She right? Jecim say the same thing?*

I laugh. Jecim is giggling. She has been listening too. From her position across the room she calls out, *Uncle, she is good now. All good here. We happy now. Bad to hear about Ermei, but she a stupid woman I think.*

Jomar is apparently of the same mind on this last point. There is little more either of us want to say about it. We talk about the accident of the Honda Fit this afternoon. He was at the scene and gives me the blood and guts of it, in very graphic fashion, showing me photos of the blood and guts in a manner that I would have

⁴⁵ Kid.

been happy to not have been shown. But to not look, here, would be considered an insult to the man.

Still, there are things that it is best to not have seen. I can't un-see it now. What a fucking mess.

Eventually, Jomar takes his leave, my bottle of brandy having been relieved of a significant volume of the delicate liquid.

Jelou comes to me. She has been giving the events of the evening a little thought. *Sir, it my fault Ermei die?*

No one is responsible for her decision to kill herself. But, you are responsible for adding to the burden of things that weighed her down. I am not going to lie, to make you feel better. ... Jelou, each of us matters. What we do matters. What we do with, and to, others matter. Most people are selfish. They only think about what they want and how they can get it. To begin to be good, you need to think about how what you do, affects those around you. ... As a child, we do not expect that concept of consideration of others to be inside the head yet. That comes as you become an adult. As adults, we are supposed to understand this and allow for such childhood selfishness. ... We are supposed to recognize those behaviors, maybe using such incidents at times to teach responsible behavior. So were you a child then? Are you a child now? I was unsure about you when you first came, but believed we needed to interfere with the childlike, and damaged, way in which you were acting. Was I right? Did we succeed? Have you grown up now?

I think you right. I was a stupid child then. Not now. Not now.

The meaning of life and haircuts

Vieve is with me tonight. I have never touched this girl. Until just a month or so ago she was a working whore. That's what she was doing when she met Kenneth. Her being with Kenneth is not a signal that she was no longer a whore, but only that she was occupied as a whore with one guy for a while.

The change in her outlook while with Kenneth also wasn't proof of anything. Wasn't he just a long job as a whore? If in the process she had doubts about that herself, that didn't mean her life as a whore was over. She very much might have found another John after Kenneth left. I expect that, if she didn't end up here that evening, it is exactly what would have happened. If Jelou was a whore in training, Vieve was the real thing and had been for a while.

I am not sure I believe people change their basic nature. We are who we are. But she is only sixteen. Possibly, she hasn't lived long enough for the behaviors and life's work to be truly considered as a fixed reality. I think back to my early life. Maybe it's not the same thing, but I started smoking cigarettes when I was fifteen. By the time I was twenty I was a two pack a day smoker. And then I woke up one morning and my chest felt weird. I didn't pick up a cigarette that day, nor did I the next day. That was forty-seven years ago and nothing has changed. I don't smoke. If you are young enough, you can decide something isn't working for you, at least I could.

If I had not heard her talk about the uneasiness she had felt but didn't connect with her life's work until Kenneth, I would not have given this a chance in hell of working.

As it is, I am, in the deepest recesses of my heart, still unsure that she is going to stay. If she goes, it will be her decision and she will not be welcomed back.

But for now, she has done all she can to be a good egg and live within the boundaries this home has. And for the sake of fairness, I note that she has used her brain and her heart to do only good

since she came here. Not one problem I have had can be laid at her feet.

Considering the stress we have all felt recently, that is not a small thing.

Vieve is an interesting kid. She doesn't speak a great deal. She hangs back and watches. She sees everything and seems to know what everyone is up to before she moves an inch. I suspect it is the residue of learning how to survive in a difficult world.

Tonight she is studying me. But I am not sure she is going to get anything worth noting in the process. I am not 'itching to jump her bones.' Yes, we will have sexual congress. We will fuck. But if we don't, it will not be the end of the world.

I go about getting undressed and putting things away, putting things in the hamper, and getting ready to shower. Vieve has done little.

I look at her, a question on my face and then expressed. *Are you going to get ready for bed?*

I thought you are going to fuck me. Why you getting ready to sleep?

We will have sex. But we live here, together. You are not here for a sex act. You live here and you live with me. Sex is part of it. But so is dressing, undressing, showering, shitting, sleeping, and all the rest. That is what life is like when it is not sex for money. Is that a problem for you?

She looks at me, completely stumped. I don't think this is what she expected. And then she asks me pretty much the question she asked me when I refused her the first time.

Am I pretty?

She is, of course. *Yes. Very pretty.*

Do you want me?

That is a silly question. She would not be here if I didn't.

Vieve, are you my girl?

I hope so.

Well, for many years to come you will be with me. You will be sick, you will look like hell, and I will still be there for you. I will get sick, grow very old, and I hope you will be here for me. Yes, we will have sex tonight. But this is not a job, not a performance to be graded. You cannot fail. We will get ready for bed. We will enjoy being with each other. That will probably include having sex. But Vieve, you are home now. You should have sex only when you really want to, not because you are supposed to do it. Do you understand?

She looks at me as if I had just given her a dressing down. She utters, *No, I not.*

For crying out loud. What do I do now? I go to her, pull her to me and kiss her. The kiss lasts a while, I hold her and kiss her again. *Vieve, you are a mistress. A mistress is pretty much a wife without the papers and in this case with other wives around me. So, Vieve, you are my wife. Stop worrying. It is really over. You are mine.*

Oh! I scared I make you not want me and you will say, Go! That really not happen?

That is not going to happen unless you start being a prostitute again.

I never again! I promise!

So you are here to stay... now wife, act like one. Let's get ready for bed.

OK! Yes. OK!

And bless her heart, she does. She hums and laughs and talks to me about a silly thing that they found at the ukay-ukay⁴⁶. It is like someone flipped a switch. She is a different person. But in a way, a younger one. More childlike. This is not what I expected. Vieve is a worldly girl. She has seen a great deal of the tough side of humanity. I didn't expect that critical eye would fall away in an instant. But it has. Or at least it seems to have fallen away. We will see what the rest of the night produces. It occurs to me that she has no clue about normal wives, or any normal life. Maybe she is modeling what she thinks a wife would be like. Maybe she is

⁴⁶ Used clothes stall near the public market.

regressing to who and what she was before life as a prostitute took her childhood away. Is it here and now that she regresses before she can learn what normal adult life will be like?

Damn, my mind is running down rabbit holes.

We are progressing toward bed. Showers are taken, and things are set aside for the night. Finally in bed, Vieve seems to be confused, frozen in place.

I reach out and bring her to me. She comes willingly if not with an understanding of what comes next. I decide to give her something to think about that signifies the consequences of being with me here, and now. Maybe that will give her an anchor.

Vieve, are you really ready to be a mother?

Sir?

Well, I might get you pregnant. Having a baby is an event, but being a mother is a lifetime commitment. When we have sex, there will be no condom tonight, unless you want to avoid pregnancy. Do you?

What you want, Sir? You want me pregnant?

I want to know if you think you are ready to be a mother. That is what I want.

I not know, but the others, they will help me, so it OK Sir. If you want, we do it.

Yes, you are correct, the others will help you, but you will be the mother. No one else can be that for you. Never again will you be a girl. You will be a mother.

But not like my mother, correct?

Yes, that is correct.

I not know how a mother is then. My mother not good I think.

I will help you as much as I can. Are you ready, or do you want to wait a few years?

No. Bad idea I wait. It OK now.

I don't need to bring her to me. She is already here. I do lean in for another kiss. I am going to take a breast in my hand, but she pushes me back, onto my back, breaks off the kiss and moves down to take me orally. This is something she knows how to do and this time, it is not for money, it is for making a family.

Sure, she knows babies aren't made by giving head, but she is going to fire me up first.

Once again, a switch has been flipped and I no longer have the young girl with me, I have the vixen. She has my balls cradled in one palm, and a hand on my dick. She is going down on me, at first not as much to get me off, as to transfer as much saliva on to me as she can, soaking my dick and her hand in the process.

Task completed, the sucking and pumping begins in earnest. She is very good at this. This is no amateur learning the craft. She has me hard, rigid, in no time.

She pulls her head back, a grin on her face and her eyes lock on to mine. There is a hungry look in those eyes. She moves up, centering her cunt over my dick, never taking her eyes off mine as she moves. They stay locked on as she sinks her cunt over my dick and impales herself. A new smile emerges, eyes affixed, as she posts on me.

I was so wet from her saliva that I am not really sure how wet she is when we join. All I know is that the process is a smooth one.

I feel her cunt muscles contracting like a ring around my dick as she moves up and down on me, as if it were her index finger and thumb encircling me. But it isn't. It isn't her fingers, it is a cunt that is doing things I not had thought until this moment are even possible.

I am grunting. Damn, this is so good. She is smiling again. She knows she has me ramped up. She reaches down and pinches my left nipple. Shit! Oh, shit. I am going to cum. This is so out of control. I have no control.

I do cum, but Vieve hasn't. She may think we are done. We are not. Not by a long shot. I push her onto her back and slide down

enough to take a breast in my mouth while I use a hand to explore cunt and clit.

Vieve complains. *No. Not needed, you cum already.*

Lifting my head up for a brief moment, *Shut up, Vieve.*

I am back on her breast. I have fingers in her cunt, on her clit and my pinky is playing with her buttole. I sense I am getting to her, at least a little bit.

Her nipple turns rock hard. She hunches against my hand. I hear her breathing becoming irregular and ragged. I keep it up.

Pushing fingers deep into her cunt, my pinky piercing through her sphincter, I bite down on her right nipple and I get my reward. I keep up the attack and a few minutes later, now biting the left nipple, I get my second reward. Vieve is pleading, *Rolie, please, nabimo⁴⁷.*

I slide up and give her a kiss. *Now we are done. We will never be done until you have cum. Clear?*

Why?

Because those are the rules of the house, and they ought to be the rules for any marriage. The wife needs to get off at least as often as the man.

Oh. I not think this is normal.

You, my sweet girl, have no idea what is normal.

She giggles. *Maybe you right. But OK, it fun.* She snuggles in a bit more. *Sleep now?*

Yes, girl, now we sleep.

I don't think there was a moment all night when she wasn't holding some part of me. Of course, I can't be sure, as I slept most of the night just fine. But each time I awaken for some reason she is latched on.

⁴⁷ Done (Cebano). In Tagalog the word is Tapos.

Morning comes with Vieve stroking my dick. As I rouse, she starts nibbling on my ear. She asks quietly. *It OK, I here tonight again?*

Ask Jezryl.

She say OK. I sure. Me and her good together.

Assuming you are correct, OK.

Good. She giggles. Very good. I go now, OK?

Yes, that's fine.

By the time I am downstairs for my coffee and some breakfast, Vieve and Jecim have gone to the market for fish. Myra has gone to work, and Jelou has gone to school. Jezryl sits down by me, a coffee in her hand, and clearly wants to talk.

You make my friend very happy.

So it seems.

You not happy about this?

Oh! Sorry. Yes I am pleased, but it is too soon. I know she is happy, but will it wear off? Will she miss what she was before? I hope not, but how can I be sure. For all of you, her change in life's direction is the greatest and maybe the hardest.

You want her, yes?

Yes. I am happy with her. I hope she stays.

Good. This good. We both yours tonight. OK?

Yes.

Rolie, what to do with Alida?

That is sort of up to Myra. She knows as much as we do. She is in the middle. I have given her more room to suggest a plan we will follow, but she also has a firm understanding of the consequences. I do not know what she is thinking. All I can be sure of is that this must be a very difficult decision for her.

She grabs my hand, kisses two or three fingertips. I can't be sure why, but tells me to wait right here. A minute later she is back with

the bag of manicure stuff, and demanding I hold out my hands. Evidently, she has found my nails are too long.

It doesn't take long before the task is done, but now she decides she needs to inspect my toenails. They too must be clipped. This takes a bit longer. But eventually she has them clipped into submission and is repacking the bag.

Rolie, you have electric clippers in a drawer in your bathroom, correct?

Yes. Why?

Charline, she cut your hair?

Yes.

Good. I get it. Wait a minute!

Wait! Jezryl, do you know how to cut hair?

Of course, yes. Why not?

I have no idea if she really can do a good job or if this is going to be a disaster.

A few minutes later she appears with what looks like a bed sheet, an extension power cord, scissors, two combs, a clip like you use to hang laundry, and the clippers.

Come to the terrace, she tells me. We do this, there.

She sits me down on my chair. The one I sit on when carving. The sheet is draped around me and clipped tight to my neck. She plugs in the clippers and starts about her work. I am in serious need of a haircut. Of that there is no question. It's not that I had put it off. It is more that I had not had to think about barbers for years. Every once in a while, Charline would announce that my hair was too long and it would be cut. Barbers are not a huge expense here. I could get a haircut for forty pesos. I just never needed to do so.

In a way I am relieved that once again, the matter has a solution. But can she do a decent job? There is no mirror to look into here. I have no idea how things are going. She seems to be confident. She seems to know about the clipper attachments. She starts with a

number 3 and then uses scissors for a bit, before using the clippers with a number 2. She doesn't use the number 1. Instead she removes the attachments to edge the back of my neck and sideburns. She moves back to the scissors and back to the clippers with the number 2 attachment.

She removes the sheet and decides she needs the clippers again but she needs me to remove my shirt, as the cuttings will get under the shirt if I do not. So, off the shirt comes and she 'cleans up' my lower neck, before brushing me off, putting some talc on me, and announcing the job is done. I thank her and am about to go inside to look at a mirror, but she has a small one with her. She hands it to me.

There is only one thing to tell her and tell her I do. *Perfect.*

The terrace is a mess with all my hair. Jezryl picks up a rice broom and starts sweeping up the mess. Life is good for me... and then I think about the folks yesterday in the Honda Fit and I feel guilty that my life is so damned good.

Soon enough my anti-reverie is interrupted by Jecim and Vieve who have returned with bags of fish. They are talking to each other a mile a minute until Jecim sees my newly cropped visage. She cries out *Oh! Gwapo*⁴⁸!

Vieve swivels her head to see me and offers her agreement. So I guess it is official. My new haircutter is Jezryl. Once I have been suitably fawned over for a minute, the two enter the house with their bounty from the sea.

The wood has been sitting, patiently waiting. My knife rests in its pocket ready to be called upon.

There are three vigils⁴⁹, and three funerals in preparation; none of them will we attend. Instead we will go about our normal lives, as un-normal as they are.

⁴⁸ Handsome. (Cebuano) Tagalog is Pogi

⁴⁹ Wakes.

Life and death occur everywhere. Everyone dies and so this crop of those who have left us, does not change the total of the population who will die here compared with those in the USA. The total for both is, simply, one hundred percent of those living will die. And as all three might not have had any more kids, their deaths make no depression on the birthrate either.

So why do I feel like life means less, is valued less here? Is it because the life span is shorter?

The life span in the USA was far shorter one hundred years ago. Did those Americans value life less? Is it the casualness of it? The intensity of the vigils, all night for many nights, with dozens of family members all gathering around, suggests that there is nothing casual about it. There is an acceptance of it that I am not comfortable with.

I suspect that, at one time, it was the same way in the USA. But now, folks die in hospitals in the USA after prolonged stays. Death is antiseptic there, no longer personal in some weird way. People die earlier here and far more from acts as opposed to illness. And even when it is illness they are either at home when death comes or in a hospital room crowded with family.

Yes, there is that difference too. When you are in the hospital here, you are never, ever alone. Family members stay with you, intercede for you, care for you, feed you, and bathe you. There are no visiting hours. It occurs twenty-four hours a day.

No, they value life in so many ways, while at the same time being so cavalier about protecting that life moment by moment. The juxtaposition of the casualness and carelessness with the intense familial homage is beyond explanation.

It bothers me. I accept death. But death by misadventure seems so wrong, and the juxtaposition of behaviors is maddening.

House Rules

The dinner table conversation is on the ribald side of the ledger. All know who my bed partners are tonight. Jecim thinks that she will be the loser as she does not have the same skills as the two tonight. Jelou is trying to figure out if it is best to have me alone or with one of these two.

Vieve suggests that she should always be there to assist the others on 'their nights.' She tells Jecim it will be OK as she will school her friend on all she needs to know. That causes a lot of laughing, hooting, teasing, and general uproar.

The only one not participating in the merriment is Myra. There's nothing I can do about that now, and I'm equally unsure there is anything I can do about it later. Clearly she is unhappy and troubled. I don't think it is with us. That is good for me, but does not make it easier for her.

She notices I am looking at her and gives me a faint smile, reaches out, grabs my hand and squeezes it gently. I give her a smile and a nod. We are OK with each other, but she is clearly jammed up.

After supper I settle in my easy chair, ready for a peaceful two hours of brandy, jazz, and a book. That is the plan. It is not what happens. Myra sits on my lap, making the drinking of the brandy impossible and the reading of a book a matter for another time.

Before, you say maybe my sister should be with Ermei's husband. Remember?

Yes, but I was not serious. Considering his time with Jelou, he probably has a taste for young girls and we don't know if he is a good guy or a bastard.

And... now that I know more about Alida, if he is a good guy, considering what he has just gone through, sending Alida his way is beyond mean.

So no?

I think not. Besides, it is not for us to be match makers.

What I do? She want to come here.

What do you want? Knowing all you know about your sister and about how things work here, and what I said before about leaving her daughter with your mother, what do you really want?

Truth? You not get angry with me?

Yes, the truth. I will not get angry.

She comes here, but she has to be with Jelou and Vieve and Jecim. She must do them good. If she fail kick her out. Let her daughter know what happens. It up to my niece to make the choice. Sex or no sex. No one pressure her.

Myra, I really do not want to have sex with a girl that young. But if I kick Alida out, assuming I have no problems with your niece, the girl gets to decide independent of her mother, if she wants to stay with us, with you, or go with her mother.

I not think you will have sex with her. I not think she will want that.

You 'do not think?' or maybe you 'hope she not?'

Both?

You know as soon as Alida is bossy I will throw her out, right?

You must tell her that first thing. She must say she understand that is the big rule.

That includes if one of you tells me she is plotting something, agreed?

Yes, but you make that clear to her too. First thing when she come.

You tell the others what you want and what I said. If they raise no other objections, she can come as soon as she wants. But, she has to know what she will have to do, all of it. And she has to accept all my rules before she comes. You must tell her. No exceptions.

She wiggles her ass against my dick, leans down, and kisses me before telling me, Yes, OK. Good, it will be her choice. You allow her, but she need to behave. Good.

Myra gets up in search of the girls and I can finally enjoy my brandy and my book. In truth, I think this is a dumb idea and I don't want Alida here. I have given her sufficient stipulations that she ought to

say, *No*. However Alida, is just hardheaded enough that I expect there is a good chance she will say, *Yes*, and then fight the rules once she gets here.

I get about five pages read and little of the brandy consumed before all the girls are assembled before me.

Yes?

Roland, what if she agrees and comes?

Jecim, then you must make her your fuck toy.

She twice my age!

Yes, but you have my trust and authority to run this home. She has neither. You are the first one here. Have I ever told you that you are not important?

No. You not do that. You just get angry when I leave.

She does as you say, or she is gone.

She not do that! You know she not!

Yes, I am hoping that is true. It will make my job easy.

Oh! Then she is sent away?

Exactly.

Myra is smiling.

Jelou looks at Myra for a moment before opening her mouth.

She must obey me too? How that?

Yes Jelou, she must obey you. Her daughter must obey you.

The girls are laughing. Jelou's eyes are big. She says, *Oh my G! So I do her like I do Ermei?*

Yes.

Same with daughter?

Only if the daughter wants it. You are not to require sex from the girl, and you are not to seduce her.

What if she wants?

Then do it.

Myra agree this?

Ask her. She is right next to you.

Myra? OK with your niece?

Myra raises her eyebrows. Permission has been given.

Jezryl stomps her foot to get attention. *Rolie, if she say things when you not here, bad things. What then?*

Tell me that it has happened and she is gone.

Promise her go only and not us?

Don't do what she wants, and I promise.

What if she say we lie?

I will not believe her. Your word is final. I turn to Myra, Agreed?

Yes. Agreed.

Anything else, girls?

I get shrugs and a couple of snickers. Myra walks out to the terrace, I suspect to call her sister. I once again return to the brandy and book. This time I am not interrupted. The brandy disappears and I get to the end of a chapter before putting the book down.

I have a bet with myself. Half of me thinks Alida will try to renegotiate with Myra on the phone and the other half thinks she will wait and try to do that face to face with me. None of me really thinks Alida will agree right away. I have no idea whether she will ever agree to my terms. In any case, it may get Alida off Myra's back. That is the only thing I care about now.

My book has been down for a few minutes and I am listening to Thelonious Monk's, *Round Midnight*. Many, many folks have recorded this, but Monk's is special.

I am thinking of having a bit more brandy, but having not moved an inch, maybe I will allow the thought to just slide by. My eyes are closed as the music fills me.

Rolie, you awake?

Yes Myra, I am awake. What happened? Did she argue with you?

Yes.

She wants a change in the rules?

Yes.

You told her that it is not possible.

Yes! How you know?

Doesn't matter. So how did it end?

She coming here.

Oh? To move in?

No. To talk to you.

I see. But you told her it would not matter?

Yes.

When is she coming? Tomorrow while you are working?

No. She comes now.

Oh! Hub. I didn't expect that. Tell everyone to gather around when she comes. We will do this as a group.

OK.

Fifteen minutes later Alida is escorted under duress into the house by Myra. I gather Alida wanted to speak with me privately on the terrace. Myra told her it was 'inside or go home.' Good for Myra. That was the first control battle, but not the last.

Rolie, we talk alone. Not this way?

Why? You are asking to join this house. They are part of this. Why do you think they should not be allowed to hear what is said? Why do you think they should not voice their opinions?

I want you, not them!

That is not possible. You join us or you don't join us. There is no 'join me.'
Didn't Myra tell this to you?

That Myra, that not you.

You are wrong. That was me.

I not want that.

Alida, I really don't care. You want to be part of this house? Well, you have to follow the rules of the house. You do not make the rules here. All you can do is follow them. It's follow the rules or go. There is no other option. I agreed to allow your sister to tell you that you can come and live here. But I gave her the rules you must agree to. These are the same rules that all the others here live with. Ask them if you do not believe me. Ask them.

Last time we talk you say I cannot come because of my daughter. Why you change your mind?

Because you have been making your sister's life miserable by harassing her. I care about your sister and do not want her to be unhappy. We talk, all of us, and we decide what must be. The agreement is made between all of us. So I tell Myra to say, OK you can come but the child comes too. If your daughter has sex here, that's your fault, not ours. So you can come, but you must follow our rules. You must not be bossy, ever, to anyone or you must leave.

You going to have sex with my daughter?

I don't intend to. But if she asks to enter my bed, yes. That is the risk we both run. If you do not want to run that risk, stop badgering your sister and stay away from here. It is simple. No one is pushing for you to live here, except you. Anything that happens will be on you, not us. I don't want you to join us, but more than that I need you to stop making your sister miserable. If that means accepting you, we will.

You make her have sex with the girls?

Jelou, you asked that very question. What did I tell you?

You say no sex with her unless she wants it.

Alida turns to Jelou and instructs the girl. You may not have sex with my daughter.

I not take orders from you. You take orders from me. I here first. I not listen to you!

You will! How dare you!

OK, that's enough! Alida, get out. You are not welcome.

What?! Why?!

Myra, did you tell your sister that she is not allowed to boss anyone here?

Yes.

Alida didn't I just get done telling you the same thing? Didn't I say that if you are bossy you are out?

Yes.

And that, Alida, is why. You already broke the rules.

But this girl is fourteen! You expect me to take orders from her?

To the extent that you can't tell her what to do, yes. Your age doesn't entitle you to special treatment. Jelou is a part of us. She is to be respected. Vieve is older than Jelou. Vieve, does it bother you that you can't order Jelou around?

No!

Myra, Jecim and Jezryl were here before you. Did I give you permission to boss them?

No. I not allowed. I try once. It big mistake. I never will do that again.

Are you sure you explained this to your sister?

Yes. I tell her.

OK, then. We are done here. Myra, walk your sister to the gate. And Alida, stop badgering your sister. All you are doing is pissing me off. If you persist, I will instruct your sister to stop talking to you.

Alida is angry and crying all at the same time. *Why you do this to me?*

I am not doing anything but telling you that you are not special. This house has rules and all who live here follow the rules. You don't want to follow the rules. That isn't going to work.

It OK if I think about it for a day? Maybe I am wrong.

OK, but if you badger your sister in any way, from this moment on, then the answer is no. Are we clear?

Yes, yes, we clear. I go now.

And go she does, without the help of her sister.

The girls are still grouped around me, but they are hugging Myra, who is crying.

There is no way to enjoy the raucous jazz that is playing right now. It is just a mess of sound as it mixes with the sounds of the girls. I would get up and go upstairs but it would be taken as a sign of disapproval and that is not something I want them to feel right now.

Additionally, I have no idea why Myra is crying. So I sit there, chin resting on the heel of a hand, waiting and clueless, just looking at them.

Jecim notices me and starts to laugh. The others one by one look my way and the crying stops as Myra looks at me and laughs as well.

I can't figure out what is happening. *Well?*

Rolie, why you look like that?

Like what, Myra?

Like that! Pointing to me.

Why were you crying?

I happy! You protect me. You respect me. You tell my sister she make you angry when she mean to me.

And that is a reason to cry?

Of course!

And the rest of you... you know this? You know why she is crying?

Jecim, who has finally gained a modicum of composure, smiles and assures me that they did understand why Myra was crying. It's a clear case of Mars and Venus.

OK, now... if the crying is complete... Will someone tell me if she is going to come back? I don't have a clue about what she will do next.

It seems that no one has any idea what the final result will be. Myra tells us that no one has ever treated her sister like this before. I can see that all, me included, tried to 'be reasonable' with her before. But that doesn't work. She just takes your reasonableness as a way to argue a point in another way.

She is not used to hitting the wall as completely as she did tonight. The biggest wall was when I put Jelou above her. That just was something that she couldn't fathom. I don't think it would have occurred to me to make that point if Myra had not pulled age/rank on Jecim in the beginning. Once was enough. And Myra was not the danger that Alida seems to be now.

Myra was very wrong back when I threw her out, but she did learn the lesson fast enough. I have a sense that would not be the case with Alida. It is quite possible that Myra was emulating her older sister, when she did what she tried, back then. Only to find it didn't work. She was brought up short, by the immediate blowback. Myra learned the lesson straight away and there has not been one more occurrence.

I am completely unsure if Alida can learn that lesson. In any case, Myra didn't come with a daughter. I wouldn't have expected any mother to want to bring her daughter into this house.

Alida sees herself in that mother role, and it is completely reasonable. That is what she is. There is no faulting her for that. The fact that she even considers entering this house, and bringing her daughter here, is a little amazing and it un.masks her selfishness.

I just learned last night, from Myra, before Alida's visit, that there is no problem with Alida living with their mother other than Alida doesn't want to take orders. It was at Alida's insistence that Myra agreed to move out of the family home and rent an apartment the two sisters shared.

Alida desperately needs to be in control. It is why using Jelou as the wall is so difficult for Alida. It is the most extreme example of the way things will have to be, and a message to not mess with Jelou or anyone else here, and screw things up. Just because Alida might think she can or thinks she is entitled to do so based on her position as 'mother' simply isn't acceptable.

Placing Jelou as a protected actor, creates a double bind for her. She wants to protect her daughter from 'evil' and she wants to mother others such as Jelou. But she is being denied both while, in fact, Jelou is the most immediate danger to her child. She does not want to see children as evil. But to allow Jelou to act, she would see evil. She may want to 'correct' Jelou. To guide her to the 'right' path. That would be a fucking disaster.

I do not have any idea what she will do, but I have made her option to enter this house as unpalatable as is possible, and not without reason.

For now, she is gone and we need to settle down.

We have had enough craziness around here. Everyone but Jezryl and Vieve are on your own. You two, finish up what you are doing. It's time to go upstairs.

Jecim and Jelou pull Myra along with them. My companions for the night evidently are ready and each grab one of my arms in an effort to get me moving faster than I might have otherwise moved. As we ascend the stairs I am getting a fairly colorful account of all the things they are going to do to me, and with me, tonight.

I guess if I was a bible thumper I might be shocked. As it is, I just think it is funny and start laughing. Well, that gets them a little offended! How dare I laugh at them when they are trying to give me a night to remember!

Do you remember how old I am? Good lord girls. Have a little compassion! There is no way we are going to do what you have planned. But no matter what, I am glad to be with the two of you.

Once in the bedroom I am getting moved around like a piece of furniture, and I start resisting a bit. That gets another complaint.

Rolie, we know we not prostitutes now, but tonight, just once, be our guy like that. Me and Vieve, we do this together like when we do this before. We want you allow this. We make you feel good. We give you show. ... Please?

I don't want you as prostitutes. I want you as my life long girls.

We know this. Truly, we do. It make us both very happy. But we want do this tonight. It a present to you. Just this once!

No! Vieve is upset. Jezryl! I do something with Jelou and Rolie another time. Jelou need to do this too, but not with you! Not with her sister. Rolie, you know Jelou, she love you, you know?

Vieve, first, no to both now and with Jelou. Second, I know she is attached to me. But calling it love... is just silly. It may be a lot of meaningful and serious things. But love? No, not love.

You wrong, Rolie. You wrong.

Are you going to tell me you love me too?

You not know this?

Really? You think what you feel is love?

Yes! Maybe not at beginning. Yes it true.

OK, Vieve. OK. I am very glad you and Jelou love me. I will try to always earn it and do good by both of you. But since you love me, I ask you to leave the prostitute days behind. I know you have skills from those days. It is not possible to unlearn what you have learned, but leave the rest of it in the past.

Rolie? Jezryl looks troubled.

What?

Why you think Myra cry?

I thought you all told me, before.

How you so stupid?! She love you. She say to us, 'See? He love us, all us. Why he protect us, even Jelou, if he not?' She right. We know you love us. We love you. We protect you. Jelou die for you if that needed. We your girls. Not Alida. Alida for Alida, no one else. But you for us. We for you! This love. We know Charline not love you and hurt your heart. Yes, we know this. We know you think, love not real. Rolie, you wrong.

I am not wrong, but there is no way I am going to talk them out of this. There are times when all you can do is dig a deeper hole and that is not in anyone's interest here.

But think about it. How in the name of anything that is sane in the world, even if there is such a thing as love, how can these two sixteen-year-olds really be in love with a sixty-seven-year-old man?

It is just beyond nonsense. Yes, I have pulled them out of a scary world and given them a safe place. A place to care for, and about, others, and to be cared for by others while at the same time assuring them free agency as they move through the world. The only real restrictions on them are to protect the others in this home and to make sure I am OK. Expectations much as any real family might have.

I have given them a 'home.' That is no small thing. It gives an anchor for their hearts. They are safe, and their future is safe. Somehow, they morph safety into love. Is it because there is no option to 'love' anyone else without losing what is here? That is coercion, is it not? Can love spring from coercion? I guess I will have to think about that.

And then again, what is marriage if not a form of coercion? Oh, you may enter it innocently, but leaving it can be very painful. Government and society makes it unpalatable to walk away. Here they make it nigh on impossible. So, if marriage is coercion, then how can this be as bad? They can walk away at any time without penalty. They leave, if they should, with what they came with and possibly much more.

Things that say, I love you

Vieve and Jezryl are close to crying, as I get the jazz playing. Dinah Washington is singing, *If I Had You*. She is a favorite of mine. But this is not a time to get lost in the music.

Regardless of what I think, these gals see things through a different filter. Maybe for them, it is too painful to think that this is just a deal with the devil. Or maybe they have been acculturated to understand that this must be actual love. There is no way I am going to change their thinking. They see it as love. It is time to offer a detente on the matter and move forward if possible.

OK, OK, so maybe I'm an old fool. But you are here, you are not going anywhere and you are mine. So knock it off.

They do and start moving me around like furniture as they resume activities. My clothing is removed before they remove theirs but, in short order, we are all naked as the day we came into this world.

That done, they pull me on to the bed and pin me down, legs across my arms, legs across my legs. I guess I could force my way up if I was so determined, but for now I am held in place.

There is little going on. They are playing with my dick and balls, but it doesn't seem like they are trying to get me off. It's just light fondling. A cunt hovers over my nose, but does not make contact. I can see a glistening on the cunt lips, but nothing is dripping on me.

What are you girls doing?

Relax Rolie, just relax. Vieve and me are deciding what we want to do. Just relax and enjoy. This may take a long time, a very long time.

OK, so I told them, stop being whores. For whores, time is money. You get the guy off. At least that is the way it is most of the time. Granted there are times when the whore is bought for the night and then, sure, they have to make the good times last a bit. Is that what they are doing now?

They are just playing with me, but they are no longer whores. I told them to not play it as if they were. Have they acceded to my instructions? Nothing is clear to me. For now, they are just playing with me enough to keep me hard.

I guess the question becomes, how long will they drag it out? What is their objective? I suspect this is may be an all-nighter but I hope not. I really don't want to live with hookers or girls who are reliving their hooker life. I don't want to become the pimp with the heart of gold who just doesn't make them work anymore.

Did I become that, in part, because of my protectionist actions earlier tonight?

My mind is wandering and I am getting limp. The response from up above seems to be amusement.

Why you soft? Clearly this is not what Vieve expects.

Now it is time for me to laugh. *Hey, it feels good and I am relaxed... and it's not as sexy as it just lets me drift.*

Vieve has her answer. *No more drifting for you!*

A cunt comes down on my nose and mouth. My legs are partially released until a body lies across them and I find a mouth making an assault on my dick. My dick responds, rapidly rising to the occasion.

Drifting is hard to do with a cunt on your nose, making breathing your main concern. My hands are pinned so I send the message by nipping at a clit a little harder than is probably comfortable.

In response I get an *Oi!* And the cunt lifts up a bit.

What do you expect when I can hardly breathe, Vieve?

Oh! Sorry, sorry.

Come kiss me instead.

My arms are released and in consequence I get the girl in my arms, her lips on mine, one of her hands on my shoulder, and the other in my hair.

Mmmm, much better. She smiles back in return.

See? This love. You want to kiss me. This love.

Should I remind her that Jezryl is doing magical things at this very moment to my dick?

We kiss again. Vieve is convinced she has made the argument for this being love as clearly as can be made. Now her lips are trying their best to cement that understanding in place.

I decide to not disabuse her of the notion. The kiss is too nice, her arms too enjoyable. But most of all, I want nothing to interfere with the incredible action I am getting from Jezryl. She has got me all sorts of worked up.

How do you explain a really good act in giving head from any other? There are many gals who are simply incompetent in this regard, but that leaves a fair number who are pretty good at it. Some are really good at it. But there are some whose mouths and throats along with their talents are the Stradivari of the act.

I could tell you about the suction. Clearly it is good. I could tell you about how she uses her throat when I am deep down her, to squeeze me. I could tell you about how when she pulls back and uses her tongue and hot breath to send waves of pleasure through me. I could tell you how she uses her hands to hit some incredible places that have an effect on the prostate to make things far more intense. Sure, I can tell you all that, but I will never be able to convey in words what Jezryl does to me.

There are things that words cannot do, and one of them is to explain what my sweet, pretty, young, slight of build girl is doing to me right now, other than to say that Vieve's lips are getting the reward for my deepest emotions that are piping through my being because of Jezryl's activities.

Vieve thinks it's love. I think it's Jezryl.

I pull Vieve tight into me, kissing her with real passion that has no regulator, no limit switch. It floods out of me and to Vieve, before I end it by flooding Jezryl's throat as my body shudders, my back

arches, and sound that cannot be described bellows from deep in my chest.

I am most assuredly done. Jezryl slides up next to me. I now have a girl on each arm. Not bad, not bad at all.

I don't really want to turn off the music as Nicole Henry is singing, *A Day in the Life of a Fool*. And so, I wait for it to end. Slowly we settle in for the night with me in the middle and hands on me from both sides.

Morning is a lazy thing. The girls are still here and I think they have been waiting for me to awaken. Jezryl has a big smile showing me white teeth.

Good morning. You want to pee and we have more fun?

Jeez, peeing is probably the least of it. Do you really want more sex, or are you just trying to please me?

Both?

Uh-huh. You girls think that love is shown in one of two ways. Protecting someone and sex. You want to make sure I know you love me. But what you are trying to show me, can be shown with hugs, kisses, small things, and simple courtesy. Yes with sex and protection too. All these things count. You should know that I firmly believe that you really want me to know you love me. You don't have to convince me. I already know it.

Go pee! says Jezryl who either got the message and doesn't care, or who didn't get it a bit. I have no way to know. In either case, I guess I don't care. I want to shit, shower, shave, have a small breakfast and get out on the terrace with my wood.

There are times I just need to find tranquility and, for me, it requires wood in my hand and a good carving knife in the daylight, and brandy and jazz at night.

With those things and these women to assuage my needs and loneliness, there is nothing else I desire. I do not desire love. I know the girls swim in a world that seems to require the thing, but I don't. In fact, the concept scares me.

And two great examples of why it really isn't love come with the names Alida and Charline. My girls will call them outliers. But are they? Or are they simply more naked in their actions?

Charline wasn't so naked in her ambitions before. She hid it remarkably well for years. I fell for the act completely. Alida is the only one remarkably transparent in her actions.

Charline has been on my mind. There is continuing talk that she has messed up royally and wants to come back. I have tried to quietly send the message that she is not welcome.

In truth, I am not sure what I can do if she walks in. We are still married. I want to file for a legal separation. But unless I can prove sexual infidelity on her part, I have no grounds yet. If she had been gone for a year, I could have filed for abandonment. It has been far less than a year.

There are ten grounds for a legal separation. I could list them here, but what's the point. Even if I can prove the sexual infidelity she can counter sue that so have I, and that is, in fact, a defense against legal separation! Yep, go figure. Under Title II of the Family Code of the Philippines in Article 56 it says that a petition for legal separation shall be denied "Where both parties have given ground for legal separation[.]" In other words, all she has to do is in legal language say, *'You did too!'*

The Philippines is against dissolving marriages. That's pretty clear. If she returns, she can force these gals out as well. She owns the house and the land it sits upon.

Jomar tells me not to worry about it. But I do worry. I am worrying even more this morning following the protestations of love I have received these last few hours.

Charline has not tried to contact me. Would she? I mean would she before she shows up at the door, her door? Or would she walk in as if she had just come back from a long innocent stroll? *Hi Honey, I'm home!*

Her family has been told to keep her away for her own good. I gather Jomar did that. But will that deter her? At this point I actually hope she finds someone over in the States and settles down there. Or to say it more bluntly, I hope she succeeds in her plans, albeit with a new guy. It will be the best for both of us.

She's a bitch so let someone else take the bitch. She can file for divorce while in the States. The divorce will be legal there but not recognized here. It will allow her to remarry over there and leave us permanently married in the Philippines. It's not the best of all outcomes, but if she were to remarry there, it means that she would likely not be coming back at all. If she did return after remarrying, it would give me grounds to sue for separation from her as a bigamist.

With that, I might even be able to get a temporary restraining order against her.

Well, enough daydreaming and fantasizing. It is getting me nowhere. It's just that it is a worry, I guess. And maybe it's easier to think about that then to think about the more pressing matter of Alida. Granted, I have no idea what she will do, but whatever it is, I suspect, I will not like it.

My three 'housekeepers' are home, but two of them are leaving for the market in a couple of minutes. Vieve will remain behind. It is she who will provide lunch.

The wood has been waiting for my hands to end their idle time and return, blade in hand, to the grains that are desiring release from the block. Freeing them from the confinement they might never have hoped to escape, were it not for me and my sharp and trusty tool.

I am carving with considerable concentration as the two leave for the market. I continue to carve until Vieve, giggling a bit, says, I gather not for the first time, *Rolie! Lunch!*

I was able to get a fair bit done this morning. There were no more interruptions.

Lunch is nice and not simple. I am not sure how to classify it. It's sort of a soup, sort of a noodle dish, sort of a chowder of pork, fish balls, shrimp and quail eggs. Some folks put chicken liver in it, some Chinese sausage, some Chinese cabbage, which you may know as bok-choy, or what it is called in the Philippines, pechay. The dish is called 'lomi' and it is delicious. There are, I suspect, hundreds of versions of this dish. You can even get a minimalist version at Chow King, a fast food chain. This version is Jecim's mom's recipe and I love it. She made it earlier before she left for the market.

I am sure I eat far too much of it, but that's what happens when you get a dish like this. It's hard to stop. I finally push my chair back and announce that I have been a fool to eat so much.

I guess I am sedentary. I don't go out of the yard much. I just stay planted here, allowing the girls to run most errands. I no longer need to make my visits to the pharmacy. Myra brings my prescriptions home, so no traveling to Mercury Drug any more.

Jecim and Jezryl do all the shopping. So that trip is no longer needed.

I don't socialize much. Never had many friends, ever. It just wasn't what I did. Here I never felt the need. When we have the local festival, in the purok, I try to get out and say hello to my neighbors. But that is once a year.

And so, it is no secret that if you need to find me, come to my home.

Lunch is over and I am back out on the terrace when Jomar comes over for a visit. There doesn't seem to be any reason other than he has some time on his hands. He enquires about Jecim as she is not here. A mention of the market is all that is needed. He laughs. *That girl takes forever just to choose the best sitan! Her eye is good. She not buy anything if it not meet her standards.*

I acknowledge the truth in it and that leads to his next question.

This Jelou. It really OK with her?

Yes. She has worked out fine.

She in school now?

Yes.

It surprise me. Truly. I think she a bad one.

She was headed that way. It is true. But it seems we caught it in time.

I hope you right. Her mother no good.

So I have heard.

You hear the rumor about Charline?

I have heard the talk that things are not going well for her. Is there more?

Maybe not. We know before her boyfriend dump her. But this talk is new. Maybe something else happen.

It worries me too. But there is nothing I can do.

You should do nothing. Nothing. If something happen, it best if you not involved in it.

I am sure I do not want to know what you are talking about.

This true. Good! You do not! But I tell you... I talk to her father. I tell him, it best he not send any money to her. He not help her. It best for him and for her. He promise me, he not help the daughter.

From the gate we hear, Hi Uncle!

How my niece?

Very good, Uncle. We come back from the market now. Much vegetable and fish here. You stay for supper, maybe?

Who cooking?

Me! I cook. You will like it. I promise.

Yes, I sure. Little one, you not entitled to invite me! And I not going to ask Roland now. What he say but certainly you eat with us! No, I not impose myself.

Uncle! You wrong, this my house too now. If I want to invite my uncle, I have right to do this. I not have to ask permission from Roland. He not require this.

I see. And when you gain this right, child?

Jecim looks at me. I am not sure what she is looking for. She is right of course, but exactly when this right was conferred is as ambiguous to me as it may be to her. I am not sure.

Uncle, I know when but that not for discussion here. I have it. I want you to stay for supper.

You afraid of saying in front of your friend, maybe?

No! Jezryl have same right. Same do Myra, and Vieve, and Jelou too. We all have it. Roland, be fine with it.

Roland, my niece make this claim. This true?

She is correct in every detail. I have many rules, but they are free to invite friends. In Jecim and Myra's case family members are welcome. For Jezryl there is no parent to invite. Vieve would never think of inviting her mother or her older sister. I suspect you may have things to do before supper but you are welcome at our table.

Another surprise. You follow the Filipino way. I like this about you. You correct of course, I do have things I must do, before supper. But if I free, I try and come... Jecim, I think your mother be happy if you visit her with Roland and stay for her supper some time.

OK Uncle. I do it. I hear mother talking, correct?

Yes, child you do.

That why you come, Uncle?

Child! How can you say such a thing?

Uncle, you bad at lying!

There is a huge smile on her face and then one on Jomar's face. He gets up places a kiss on Jecim's cheek, shakes my hand and leaves us.

I was so sure he had come to talk about Charline and all the time, he was just delivering a gentle scolding of Jecim from her mother.

I get a kiss from each girl as they regather their bags and enter the house, making a second trip back for some bags that made it here via the tricycle but were too many for just one trip from the gate.

And they are back out again offering me some bibingka and some buko juice, both gathered from their journey to the market. The bibingka is still warm from being cooked. It's a nice treat. Jezryl is close by and I am about to make a comment to her, but she beats me to the punch.

Small things that say, I love you. And she smiles.

Just when you think they weren't listening, they prove you wrong... again.

All I can do is smile, before I tell Jecim how much I enjoyed their lomi. She beams with pride. It is well deserved.

Mother's Day

I am guiding the knife over the wood. I am minding my own business. It is a sweet day. The girls are laughing and enjoying life not that many paces from me. The breeze is gentle today, but enough that no fan is needed.

It's overcast. In the States, we might well call it gloomy. We might say the absence of the sun brings on a dour feeling. We celebrate sunshine and call a sunny day, a good one. Here it's the opposite. A good day is an overcast one. It's cooler and the skin will not darken.

And so today's overcast is pleasing to the girls.

The kitchen will be cooler and I have no doubt that part of Jecim's offer of a fine supper was connected to the fact that it will be cooler as they cook today.

That is not to say that the offer was without real caring and love for her Uncle. Surely, there is. But in all we do in our life, the practicalities do factor in. To deny it makes no sense.

I call out to Jecim and a minute later she is at the door. *What you want?*

Call your mother and ask her when is a good day for us to come over, and what can we bring. We are not coming without bringing something, unless she doesn't want me to come.

Ab! I see you learn our custom good. OK I ask.

If you just ask, what can I bring, and you are a foreigner, you will be told, *'not needed, just come.'* To that I say, bullshit. Her mother, sweet gal that she is, would have done that. Now she will tell Jecim what to bring.

I return to the wood. I guess it is therapy, good for my mental health. Ha... now that I think about it, I am sure there are some who would call me mentally ill, considering how I live. Oh well, mental health always is laden with political and societal baggage. In

fact, much of it has nothing to do with health and everything to do with prevailing norms of the culture, the society.

Sure, some of it is real. If you are hearing voices telling you to kill, you are simply nuts. But most of what passes for mental health practice has nothing to do with that. ... now why was I thinking about shrinks? Oh, yeh, the wood as therapy. Yup, back to the wood.

I am sitting down on the terrace when I hear, *Ay-oooo! Ay-oooo!*

Rising I go to the gate to find a woman there I do not recognize.

What do you want, Madam?

Sir Ronald?

Yes, who are you?

No remember? No good English, Cebuano?

Dili. Wait!

I call for Jecim to come quickly. I don't move, as that might signal to the woman that I am refusing her. I am not, but I need to hand this off to Jecim who can speak with her.

And so I stand there, useless and frustrated that I can't speak the language. The reality is that I am no damned good at languages. It has always been that way, ever since I tried to learn French and Latin as a kid.

Jecim does appear and engages the woman. Not more than three sentences pass between them before Jecim is opening the gate ushering the woman into the house and calling to the others, in a very excited voice. Just as Jecim disappears from view, as she herself enters the house, does she turn around and tell me I am an idiot for not remembering that this is Myra's mom.

Well, she doesn't look angry. That's a good start. Why she is here when she knows Myra won't be here is puzzling. But then, as I have no clue as to what is being said, I am at a huge disadvantage.

I just stand there at the gate for a bit, stupefied. Well, fuck, there is no way I am going to be able to settle down with the wood now. I decide that maybe I can learn something by going inside.

Entering, I see them all at the dining table. A bowl of lomi is in front of the woman, who has just tasted it and announces, *Lamian nga!*⁵⁰

It is no surprise that she likes it. But once again, this does not look like an unhappy woman. So what's up?

There is this thing that Filipinos do to point. They use their lips. Vieve is indicating to me via this silent manner to sit down next to her.

As I sit down, the woman stands up, walks over to me gives me a big hug, and a kiss on the cheek. Now I am totally lost. *Would someone please explain what is happening?*

Jecim has a grin as large as is possible, and tears on her cheeks. But she is trying to explain. *Roland, we not know much yet, but she is very happy with you. Both because you love Myra and are good to her, **and** because you have refused Alida. That's all we know so far. Wait and I will explain when she says more.*

I'll be damned. I sure as hell wasn't expecting that. Yeh, I heard the stuff about me loving Myra, and no, I'm not touching that in any manner. Let it be. I never said I did and so what someone else says about me is not my problem. Anyway, I know Myra thinks I love her, so that is where her mom gets the message. For the record, I don't know, or at least I don't remember, the gal's name.

You can see the resemblance between Myra and this gal. Age changes you, and I am a prime example of that, but it is there. She must have been a real beauty at one time in her life. She ain't exactly bad right now. I suspect she is in her mid-fifties. If we were in the USA, all would say she is too young for me. Here no one would ever think such a thing. Too old, yes, but not too young.

⁵⁰ Cebuano for Delicious (in Tagalog, masarap)

I haven't had another word from Jecim, but as Myra's mom knows about these gals and she knows Myra is one of them, she is not going to be a problem for me. She also knows I don't want Alida here, and seems genuinely happy about that. I sure want to know more. There is a vigorous conversation going on, so I gather there is much to learn.

And then I hear, what I think Jecim is saying, 'Wait, I will tell Rolie'. Yup, that's what she must have said because the gal says OK and waits.

Marjune say she know about Charline. Your wife bad and you right in what you do. No one blame you. She say she happy she find you.⁵¹ She not think her youngest daughter ever be happy because of two things. Alida orders her around and make her life bad. She dream of a man who cannot be and want no one else. You that man and now Alida not order her. You make her little one happy. This never happen before. She say Myra always different. She not understand all but she different.

I nod and smile at Marjune, as I now know her name. Jecim continues.

It good that Alida back at her house. Now Analiza⁵² is happier. Analiza not happy before when the child is away from her. (I gather Marjune is saying that her granddaughter was unhappy when she was living in the apartment with Alida and Myra.) Rolie, Jezryl and Vieve right, Alida a bad mom. Too selfish. Always arguing. She not care if Alida go away but not want to see Analiza hurt, so better if Alida there. She agree with you, this not a good place for Analiza. She not mean anything bad, she just know, this not right for the girl. She know what you say last night. She know you just try to

⁵¹ Here again we have the classic use of pronouns in a way that drives most native English speakers crazy. This paragraph is chock filled with it. If I was to write it as proper English rather than how it was spoken, it would read: *She says she is happy Myra found you. She didn't think her youngest daughter would ever be happy because of two things. Alida orders Myra around and makes Myra's life bad. Myra dreamed of a man who couldn't really be and wanted no one else. But, you are that man and now Alida isn't able to order Myra around. You make her little one happy. This has never happened before. She say Myra always different. She doesn't understand why but Myra is different.*

⁵² I know there is an "Anal" in the name but it is a concatenation of Ana Liza. Such names are not uncommon and can cause individuals who are not familiar with Filipino culture to do a double-take. But the name is probably originally a phonetic variation of the European name, Annalise.

make sure Alida give up the bad behavior. She know you not want to hurt the child. Myra tell her this many times.

Jecim pauses, I think to catch her breath if for no other reason. There is nothing for me to say. I just sit and smile. Evidently there is more to come from Jecim.

I tell her she welcome to come visit at any time. She always be honored guest. She happy to hear this and hopes that there another grandchild she visit in the future. I tell her that you hope so too! And with that a big smile is in evidence on the faces of each of my girls.

All I can say is, *Good. You spoke correctly.*

OK, you can go now. We will not talk about you anymore. Now it just gossip! We are happy. Maybe she play cards!

My three gals are sixteen. Marjune has to be about thirty-five years older, but it makes no difference. There is no generation gap. They are really having a good time. Oh, if there were others who were older, Marjune might well gravitate to the older ones, but it is not a given. Not here.

I decide I can with equanimity return to the wood and exit to the terrace. I know all I probably need to know. Alida is a bad mom, but it looks like Marjune is a good one. If Marjune thought that having Alida here would solve the problem for her... getting rid of the problem daughter and keep the good granddaughter, I would have had a very different feeling about her. But I gather she realized, just as I did, that separating mother and daughter, even a problem mother, can be a big mistake.

Marjune has decided that she can be the good de facto parent, while Alida pays attention to no one but Alida. So long as Alida is in the picture, Marjune figures, it will work out. I suspect she is right.

Marjune leaves mid-afternoon, but as she leaves she stops on the terrace, is shown some of the figures I have carved which she seems to make a fuss over. I ignore all of it. As she leaves, she

comes over to me and plants another kiss on my cheek. She says, *Thank you*, and takes her leave of us.

My three each take a seat on the terrace. As it is pretty clear that we are going to be talking, I lay down the wood. They take that as the signal to start and Jezryl starts out with, *See! Me and Vieve right. Alida a bad mother!*

Yes, you were, but Marjune is not. If the child...

Analiza...

OK, if Analiza is with Marjune, then she is getting good parenting. Marjune does not want Analiza to come here. I think from what Jecim said earlier, that is Marjune's feelings, or did I misunderstand?

Jecim offers that I got it correct. And so, while it is nice to know that the kid will be well cared for, it doesn't answer how we move forward if Alida agrees to the terms we laid out last night.

So girls, I fail to see what we do about the offer we made to Alida. Marjune, sweetheart that she is, just torpedoed it. That's why she came, or didn't you figure that out?

Ha! They didn't have a clue. It is dawning on them now. Each looks shocked for, I suspect, different reasons. Vieve starts laughing. I can't help but laugh with her. The other two can't figure us out. Vieve and I ignore them. Getting her laughter under control, she asks, *When you figure that out?*

As soon as Jecim said... and I think I have it right... 'Marjune knows Alida's a bad mom, but she, Marjune, cares for Analiza. Marjune doesn't care if Alida leaves, except that she doesn't want to see Analiza hurt, so it is far better if Alida stays there too.' ... By saying that, she is telling us that there is to be no separating of Alida from Analiza and Analiza is not to come here. She is to stay with Marjune. As far as I can tell, she could not have been clearer. ... What was it Vieve? Was it the flattery of you three that caused you to miss the message?

Yes! She so nice to us, we not hear what she say!

She's not stupid. She came to deliver a message and did it in a way where no one got upset. The message was clear, but she didn't have to do it in a mean way and she didn't. I like the gal. I hardly see what she is doing as selfish. It may be, but I suspect she is right on all points. Nothing else can be done about this until Myra comes home. Oh, and the reason she came when Myra is not here is that Myra is more used to her mother's way of getting her way. It is easier for Marjune with Myra not here. Alida didn't learn persuasion in a vacuum, it's just that Marjune's is not for entirely selfish purposes.

I wish I had a mother like that.

I know, Vieve. And that is why she fool you, right?

Yes. I so busy jealous, I not see what she doing! You know, I bet Jelou know if she here.

And on that note, the meeting is over. It is close to four and, while I have a little more time for the wood, I call it a day, clean up out here and go in to shower and change.

By the time I am back downstairs, Myra is home and all are waiting for me to appear. Myra knows something is up, but not what. All she has been told is that she has nothing to worry about. There is some back and forth teasing going on as I enter the room. No one seems tense.

I sit down, and as I do Jecim pops up to get me a beer. Evidently she figures I need one. Maybe I do. That she didn't get it earlier is only because she knows I like my beer cold, without ice. And so, she retrieves one from the fridge, and pours it into a thermal mug before handing it to me and reseating herself. She's a keeper.

Myra can't stand it any longer.

What happen?

I take a drink. San Miguel really is a pretty good beer. Putting the mug down I take some pleasure in saying, *Your mother came by today.*

What!?!

She's a really nice gal. We all like her a lot and we invited her back again.

Why she come?

Oh, I think you know, but I will give you the very short version. Alida and Analiza are not to come here. There is no option where that is ever going to be OK. And Alida is never to leave Analiza behind. There is no option where that is ever going to be OK. The only thing else she said was that she was happy with me, happy you have a man to love you who you loves and she hopes for a grandchild from us. That is all of it.

She really say that? How you know, she not have English?

Ask your house mates.

All it really would have taken is a simple ‘*Yes she did,*’ from each of them but it is taking far, far longer. I give up and retire to my easy chair, my jazz and my book.

Roland come back, we done.

I wonder why Jecim still calls me Roland. The others call me Rolie. Yes, every once in a while Myra calls me Roland, but not often.

I move back to the table. My beer is almost finished. Jecim wants to know if I want a second one. I tell her, not now. Myra has a wine glass filled with some bottled Sangria. It’s a Philippine concoction almost similar to the real thing. It isn’t, but they don’t know it. It’s cheap, and it can be purchased locally. I think this is the second or third glass for her as the bottle has seen a fair bit removed from it.

Myra takes a long drink from the decidedly low alcohol content beverage, puts her glass down a little more formally than normal, before asking, *Rolie what we do now?*

I really think this is up to you. Do you want to challenge your mother? It seems to me, that we either do as she wants, or we are challenging her.

Myra had told us before that her mother was sweet. I suspect what she left off was sweet on the outside with an iron fist on the inside. I like the gal, truly. I do think she means well. But she is probably, to use an old idiom, one tough broad.

Myra is stumped, but I have another question for which I need clarification. *Myra how did your mother learn of the details of the discussion last night? Did you tell her? If not did you tell anyone else?*

I tell no one. Oh! Alida! She very angry I think. Maybe she stupid and complain about you when she go back home. That why she call me today and ask if you a good man. Here the 'she' refers to Marjune. I tell her yes, you love me and I love you. She say, 'He make you happy?' I say you do. She say, 'He a good man?' I tell her yes. She say, 'He want Analiza?' I tell her the truth. You think she not be here at all. You think this not a good place for her. She ask, 'You sure about this?' I tell her it true, you also say Alida and Analiza should stay together. It bad to separate them, so Alida should not be here. I tell her Alida difficult. She say she happy I find a good man. I not tell her what we say to Alida last night.

OK. Well, Myra, I think the only option that makes any sense to me is for you to text Alida with the following message. 'You fucked up by talking to mom last night. Mom was here and talked to Rolie. Now he says, never come to his gate again. No option.'

Yes good. That right. I send it.

I wonder, when it comes to Alida, is it really game, set, and match? It seems that way, but nothing is certain except what you see in the rear view mirror. And in my mirror, I have to say, it has been a day for the moms.

The meaning of Love

What do you want as a reward for perfect grades this year? You are close to it now. So what incentive would you like?

She is laughing. Her laughter is infectious and now she has all the girls laughing. Jelou just can't stop and is convulsing in the absurdity of the request, I guess. Tears are rolling off Vieve's cheeks as she is also beside herself in mirth.

OK. What's so fucking funny?

Myra evidently can contain her merriment to answer me. *You don't know what she wants more than anything else?*

No. What is it?

Rolie! She want the IUD out.

I look at Jelou, and ask, *Really? That's what's so funny?*

She can't talk, she's laughing so hard, but she is able to raise her eyebrows up twice as the laughter seems to get even more intense.

I give up. Let them laugh a while. I will eat my dinner.

There is more to think about than Jelou's schoolwork. It has been a few hours since Myra sent the text to Alida and there has been no response at all following it, from Alida or Marjune. No response to me and none directly to Myra.

We are hopeful that the lack of response is a good thing, but how can we really know?

Tomorrow we will be at Jecim's mom's house. Iren has told us to bring some paella and some macaroni salad. Jecim asked how many will be there and got a count back that surprised her. The answer was twenty-five plus us. That is a good number more than we expected.

I think the conversation went this way, based on what Jecim tells me.

Mom, you mean twenty-seven then?

Why that? No! Twenty-five plus you.

Yes, twenty-five plus Roland and me. That is twenty-seven.

No, you not two. There more.

Oh! You mean the other girls? Really mom?

Yes, why not?

You sure? OK, OK. Who the other twenty-five?

It family, nothing else.

The answer from Iren is typical Filipino fashion, vague as hell.

Tomorrow promises to be interesting. Thirty one of us at this party. Iren and Jomar know my girls. Jecim's older sisters know us too, but even with their husbands and kids, and her brother, his wife and kids, that doesn't get us close to twenty-five.

The laughter at the table has died down. All are simply eating. I decide to return to Jelou's desire for the nature of a reward.

Jelou, I will compromise with you. You have one more year to complete before you graduate. I want you to do that and being pregnant now is going to end your school career. But I will agree to have your IUD removed during your sem-break⁵³ next year. Will that work for you?

I get eyebrows. It does work and all cheer the result, including Jezryl, who turns to me and says, *Thank you. Good that she finish school.*

Now Jelou, there is one other condition. You can take a year off to care for your baby, but I want you starting college after that.

Why?

Myra would you like to explain to your friend?

I get eyebrows from Myra, who launches into a rapid fire Cebuano lecture. I have no idea what is being said and at the same time,

⁵³ Semester Break or mid-year break of the following school year. With that she would likely be only in her beginning to middle of the second trimester of a pregnancy, should she even get pregnant that fast.

every idea because when it is done, Jelou turns to me and with an expression of disbelief asks, *You want me to get a job?*

Well, actually no, Jelou, I want you to have a profession.

No! She is actually panicky.

Jezryl, who has been silent, turns to her sister and says quite emphatically, *Yes!*

Why? You not have this.

I not lucky enough to meet Rolie when I fourteen, stupid! Ask Vieve if she agree with you or me!

Jelou does look at Vieve, but says nothing. Vieve looks back at Jelou and then swivels her head to Jezryl and point with her lips to the older of the two sisters.

In the most plaintive of voices, Jelou asks Vieve, *Why?*

You no want to be maid, correct?

Yes.

What you think you do? Sit around and eat jackfruit all day? We all work. Better a profession. More money and no cleaning toilets, or maybe wash clothes for others.

Oh. And turning to me, *You pay for this college?*

Yes.

So, if I not go to college, I am stupid?

Jelou, you are smart, very smart, but it would be a poor choice to not go further with your education. I think you might make a good psychologist, or school guidance counselor, or teacher. But maybe you will want to go into the law, or medicine. It is up to you.

You think I can do this?

Well you might have a hard time getting a job as a school counselor considering how we live, but yes you can do this.

So it help for college if I have perfect grades?

Yes.

OK, OK, I do it and you take the IUD out next October.⁵⁴

I agree.

That went far better than I thought it might. I am relieved. I was sure Jelou would push back harder on the college issue, seeing as how she is always saying that school is a big waste of time.

I also didn't expect what comes next from Myra.

See Rolie, you do love us. You love Jelou. No one do this if not love.

OK, so what am I supposed to do now? Argue with her? They are all in concurrence with Myra. I just smile and decide to finish my supper.

But Myra isn't going to let it go. *Rolie why you not say it?*

Myra, each of you is special to me. Each of you will make me sad if you leave. Each of you is a very good person. Each of you deserves my caring and protection. And each of you will have it for as long as you are here with me. What more is needed?

Say you love us!

Myra, what is love? ... No don't think this is easy. It isn't. Tell me truly what is love? Charline said she loved me. She left. I told her I loved her, now I hate her. Is love supposed to be forever? It wasn't. At least it wasn't for me. We are all very happy together. What makes me telling you something I don't even know exists, any better? So start with telling me what love is. Why isn't what I said before enough?

That doesn't go over very well. All but Jecim get up and stomp off. We two sit there and look at each other.

No words pass. Jecim knows me better than the rest do. She may not like some parts of me, but she knows it's who I am. *Roland, I go talk to them.* And she leaves the table as well.

⁵⁴ School year is from early June to mid-March at this time. In 2017 it is lengthened by about three weeks into April.

Well, shit, I am done with supper I guess as I have lost my appetite. I, too, leave the table, pour a brandy and settle in the easy chair. Ernestine Anderson is singing *Angel Eyes*. I am frustrated. Why did Myra have to push the matter? I'm not going to start lying. Each knew the score, right from the beginning. So why push what ought to be a non-issue?

I am not up for reading. I just sit, sip, and listen. My eyes are closed. I need to relax.

Roland?

At hearing Jecim's voice I open my eyes to see all of them assembled in front of me. Myra steps forward, reaches her hand out, takes my right hand, stoops down and brings my hand to her forehead. Each of the others do the same, save Jecim, who didn't leave in a huff, one at a time. The 'honoring' complete, Myra steps forward again. *Rolie, I am sorry for what I do. I not do it again. You treat us good. We thank you for this.*

What has happened? Why this? Please explain.

No one is answering me.

Jecim, what has happened?

They understand they wrong.

Come on, what really happened?

They think you want them to leave.

What?

They think because no love, they have to go. They love you but you not love them. I tell them they stupid. ... We argue, but I think about what you ask Myra. Define love! ... Yes I say to her, you say you love Roland, how that different from what he say? ... She not understand what you say. I tell her again. 'You be sad if he leaves. You think Roland a very good person. He deserve your caring and protection for as long as he lives.' So I ask her, 'What more is love? Tell me. If there is something more, I will tell Roland myself. If there nothing, then stop being stupid and apologize.' ... She not know what to say. So I say to all. Tell why love different from this? They know they wrong.

Vieve say she think there is something more but not know how to say it. I tell her, if she know, ask. Maybe he feel it too. That what happen.

Thank you. I agree. If there is something else, I want to hear what it is. I truly do not know what people mean when they say 'I love you.' Maybe you will all help me.

And now I have smiles again. Go fucking figure.

OK now that the drama is over, Jelou, you have a school project you should be working on.

Jezryl reminds all that the table hasn't been cleared, and the food is not eaten in some cases, including Jelou, who is called back to the table to finish her supper.

All leave but Jecim, who hangs back, kisses my cheek, honors me, and says, clear as a bell, and loud enough for all to hear, *I love you Roland. And Roland, it mean that no one else ever make me the happy person I am now. I can't leave you. Even if some day maybe I unhappy, I can't. My love not let me. That the difference. Maybe you not able to say that about us. I not care. I love you.*

She gets up and walks to the table with the other girls, who just look at her in silence. The only sounds, of jazz, a rendition of *Straight No Chaser*.

I suspect that Jecim has shamed them all. She has called me out as well. She hit it on the head. I don't believe that the feelings that generate statements such as hers are real. They sound good, but they have no standing in the court of reality.

Still, one by one, each comes over to me and says the same thing, kisses me and goes back to the table to finish their meal.

I try reading, but it's not going to happen. My head's just not there. My brandy is not finished. I take it and go up to the bedroom.

I settle in, listening to some more jazz, and I lie back and sip what's left in the snifter.

Maybe ten minutes later Jecim comes in and gets on the bed, snuggling against me. I put an arm around her shoulders as I mention that Jelou is to be with me tonight.

No, we switch. I here tonight. All agree.

And so, tonight, as I finish the brandy, we talk about Jelou and college, we talk about her dreams. I ask her if she wants to go to college.

How that?

Well, you graduated high school, right?

Yes. But I am the maid!

We have Jezryl and Vieve. So do you want to go to college?

They not cook good. No, I stay here, with you. You not get me a profession and send me away. I not do that!

I am not trying to get rid of you! The other two did not graduate. It's not that I don't want you to think that you can't have what I'm offering Jelou. ...

Then what?

How will you all care for the kids and this place when I am gone? Where will the money come from?

That it?

Yes.

But no! I not leave you. No college.

Getting a degree does not mean you will leave me.

Yes it do. Stop it, please.

In a little bit. But not yet. Jecim, you think I love you, right?

Roland, I know you do.

OK, so, if you think I love you, do you think I am asking these things to hurt you?

But it hurts.

OK, but if you love someone, aren't you supposed to tell that one only the truth, even if they do not want to hear it?

Why you being difficult?

Jecim, if I have a long life and die at ninety years of age, how old will you be?

Not sure. Why you doing this?

Sweetie, you will be only thirty-nine and you may have children still to raise. Even if I live to ninety that is only twenty three years from now. But I could die tomorrow or next year and more than likely in the next ten years. Jecim, there is no way Jezryl or Vieve can get a college education. But you can. Or at least a certified trade. This house goes to Charline. I can't give it to you. What will you and our children do?

Roland! Don't say you to die!

Jecim, you, Myra and Jelou need to have professions or skills to keep the family together. Vieve and Jezryl can take care of the home and the kids, but you three are going to have to be working. You say you love me. I need you to do more than say it. I need you to think about the future.

Why you say this now? Why, Roland?

I wanted to see you as a housekeeper who would decide at some point to move on. The past few days have convinced me that none of you are likely to do that. I had planned for it, by having more than one of you. I was protecting myself from what I felt when Charline left. But you really do seem to be with me until I die. So remember what I say? I care about each of you. So what happens when I die becomes important. That's why.

Jecim is crying. I am not sure why and I am not asking. They say all the nonsense about love, but what they don't get is that love requires sacrifice, doing things you didn't really want to do, or plan to do. Being a Mistress is to get what you can to meet your own needs and giving of yourself enough to keep the damned thing rolling along.

They want to push this love thing? OK, I am going to take it seriously on their part and expect them to step up and take the actions that tell me the love is real. I can give them no long term

payoff. If they are really here till the bitter end, then when I am gone, unless they step up now, the shit really is going to hit the fan.

She is still crying but holding on tightly to me and kissing me at the same time.

Roland, they can't cook! Who cook for you?

Teach them. They can learn. They may never be as good a cook as you are, but if it is just OK, then that is a sacrifice I make for the future.

What you want me to learn?

That is up to you. But whatever it is, it needs to prepare you to earn money.

I not do that before because my mother not afford this. She tell me it best to be your maid. Maybe you will love me and make me your girl. This what she say. I do it. I not think I will love you. But I do. I not want to be away from you. Now, because I love you, I must be away from you. This not fair.

And there you have it. She has finally copped to the original plan. And it is exactly as I always suspected.

See what courses are available here in Naval. It may not be necessary for you to be gone from me. Same with Jelou. If both of you can get your degrees from Naval State University, all stay here.

The crying has stopped. *I can take a year off from school every time I give birth, correct?*

Yes, OK.

Good!

Jecim gets up, removes her clothing, pulls me up and insists I strip right now.

There are times, once you have been living with someone for a bit, that you forget to really look at them. I am looking at Jecim right now. She is not even five feet tall. She is petite and pretty. Her body is not to be ignored. Her skin is smooth, her complexion perfect. Her form without any fat, and yet not a bone is evident other than her shoulders. Her thighs and calves are perfect. If you were to paint a young innocent looking Filipina beauty, you might be

painting her. Maybe she isn't a statuesque beauty queen, but you would have a hard time pulling your eyes off her if you could see her as I see her right now.

The first time I was with her, she was a virgin. She is not a virgin now. She is not shy about what she wants as we take our places on the mattress. She pushes my head to her left breast, and grabbing my hand, puts it on her cunt. She wants me to get her off. This is no 'fuck me for the team,' this is an, I need you, I need this NOW!

There is a sense of urgency about her. In no time at all she is awash in her own juices between her legs. Her breath is already ragged as I suck on her tit and flick her nipple with my tongue. I am not really responsible for her passion. I haven't done enough to take any credit. This is all Jecim.

She reaches down to see if I am hard enough to enter her. I am, if just barely. As wet as she is, it won't take much.

I weigh more than twice what she weighs, but she pulls me up on top of her. She is impatient. She wants me inside her. Carefully, so as not to put too much of my weight on her, I comply and ease my dick into her, hardening more as I proceed.

That the feel of her cunt around my dick feels good is to state nothing but the obvious. I slide back and push in, now deeper. She moans.

Her arms reach around my neck and pull me in for a long, wet kiss. She breathes my breath, I breathe hers. I continue stroking away as we kiss, her arms surrounding my neck.

No words are spoken as we rut away, minute after minute.

I feel her orgasms as they start coming. And then she seems to stop, her body has simply become a rag, mine to use as I wish. My cum explodes into her. She gasps and then sighs. It is done.

I roll off and she snuggles into me. *OK, we plan for the future. You right.*

Family Relations

Today we are all to be at Jomar's home, where Iren lives, for a party. It is a Sunday and the party will start at three in the afternoon.

Iren goes to the Cebuano language Mass at 5AM at Naval Cathedral. That gets them back home no later than 7AM. From that point on the cooking will continue right up until the party.

Jecim left for Mass with Iren, as she does many Sunday mornings, and so she is long gone from my bed when I arise. She is probably with her mom right now, helping with the cooking there. The food we are to bring was prepared yesterday. The rest of us will drive over there later today. Right now the gals are all out on the terrace giving each other manicures and pedicures.

The gals all know Iren and Jecim's sisters. They know Jomar. It is hardly a frightening thing. They have played cards together, sung videoke together. This is the first time at Jomar's home, and there is excitement about who else will be there, but they are far from tense. They are at ease.

I am as well. No one is depressed. I do wish I could get out on the terrace and spend some time with the wood, but the shavings are not compatible with the nail care in progress.

However, I can read out there without bothering them.

I eat a late breakfast, as the next meal will be mid-afternoon. Following my breakfast I take the book out to the terrace and relax.

My idle time passes nicely. I rarely read during the day, but it seems like the thing to do today. My inborn protestant work ethic doesn't even complain as it is Sunday and, as there is no NFL to watch, I am free to read at my pleasure sans guilt. But, at two in the afternoon, the girls are clipping my nails again and making a fuss that I should dress up a bit. Why? Jomar and Iren don't gussy themselves up when they come here, for Christ's sake. I am told that there being twenty-five others means that I should. It makes

no sense to me. This is just family, but I partially relent and put on a nicer shirt and slacks. Not formal, but nicer, and, that being done, I gather I have gained their approval.

I am ready to leave long before three but, in true Filipino fashion, the gals are not. We get out of the house thirty minutes after the hour for a fifteen minute trip to Jomar's place. And so, we will arrive just before four. No one thinks this is wrong or rude. It is completely as it ought to be.

It is a family gathering, but there is family here that I sure as hell was not expecting. It's Charline's family. I greet each of them, but I am beyond perplexed and seek out Jomar for a possible explanation.

Surprised, Roland?

That's one way to put it. Why are they here?

They sorry for what Charline do. They know it wrong and they lose honor. It worse for them than maybe you know. The gossip in the city, it mean. People talk about them in bad ways. They need to regain honor.

What does that have to do with being here?

Ping come to me. He say, what we do to help Sir Roland? How we make this better for him? Maybe he say it not our fault?

I see. You think this is the best way? Them being here?

Why not? Then it not them coming begging. They family and this 'accidental' meeting allow them to discuss without embarrassment.

Alright. I understand. Who is speaking for them?

The parents. This is right for you, it not?

I guess so.

Come, let us sit down with them out back. Jomar calls on a niece of his to bring us a San Miguel Pale Pilsen Grande⁵⁵, some ice and three glasses, and to bring it to the back of the house.

There is a table sitting under the shade of a mahogany tree with six chairs in the back. Ping and his wife Merly are apparently waiting for us. I haven't seen them face to face since Charline left. Both stand up and greet me, offering their hands. I take Merly's first and then Ping's, before we seat ourselves.

Roland, (this is Ping) you are our son-in-law. This always be true. We all know this. You never bad to us. You not be mean to us when Charline leave. We know Charline the wrong one. Yes, we know this true. We are sorry for this. We not able to stop her. How we do that?

Yes, Ping, I know you could not stop her. But you never say anything to warn me about putting the car in her name or the house in her name. So, I am not happy with this even if you say you are sorry now. That I have not said anything does not mean I am OK with what you did.

I don't think Ping was ready for the rebuke, but it is deserved and I think he knows it. He is looking at Jomar... I think he is looking for help, but there is little that Jomar can probably say. There is surely nothing he can say to me in this matter. Merly has a stony face. I don't think she likes having to come hat in hand to me for anything. Jomar looks at Ping and asks, *What Roland say true, correct? You know Charline plan to leave him for another man as soon as the house finished and you not warn him to not put all in her name. You tell me this before. So why you surprised by what he say now?*

Merly stands up and pulls Ping up. They are leaving. Jomar bellows, *Sit down! Merly, you want more bad name? I will make it happen! You do this to Roland. You allow your daughter to cheat him, correct? I know you know what she to do. You not warn him to not put all in Charline's name. You have the opportunity? Roland you sure they have the opportunity?*

Jomar, it is Ping with whom I went to look at vehicles. I only brought Charline to see the vehicle, once Ping and I decided on it.

⁵⁵ A litre (1000ml) size bottle.

Jomar looks hard at Ping and asks, *Does Roland lie?*

Ping shakes his head and quietly says, *No. It true. It all true.*

Merly! You lose your honor because you not have honor! Why we help you get your honor back? Why Roland do this for you?

Merly is pretty well pissed off. She has had quite enough and just wants to leave, but Ping is holding her down. His business has suffered because of all the gossip about how the family was silent as their daughter took me for a ride. I am not a faceless foreigner they have never met. I live here.

Ping asks, *What we do now to make this better? I am sorry for what I do. What I do now? I not know?*

Jomar turns to me. *Is there anything they can do?*

I haven't given it any thought before because I never thought this would be happening, but I give it a try, not knowing the realities of the law here.

Understand that, because of my actions, Charline received her US citizenship. That I cannot take back from her. It is the very valuable thing she walks away from the marriage with. But I don't want her walking away with anything else. If you two can get Charline to sign over the ownership of the house and the car to me, that would help a great deal. As to the land, if you two can get her to put the ownership of the land in an irrevocable trust for my Filipino born children, that would help. If you two can get her to sign an affidavit that she had engaged in extramarital sex, and was not contesting a separation, that would help. And finally, if you, Merly, or you, Ping, will not go around bad mouthing me when that is done, ever, then... if you two do all these things, then I will go out of my way to say you are good and honorable people. But not one moment before you two have Charline set to right what you two allowed to happen.

Jomar must have liked what I said, because he slams down the empty glass he was drinking from and announces that, if they don't do it, he will make sure more bad things will happen to them. And then he looks at Merly before saying, *Especially you, Merly. I will make you sorry you allow your daughter to cheat this man. She is a thief. You help, so you a thief too.*

Ping knows Merly is causing problems. My best guess is that Ping probably didn't know fully. It is possible, I guess, that Merly didn't tell him at all. If there is only one bad actor here, it is she. But saying he has a bad wife who does things behind his back is also a matter of losing face. So Ping sucks it up, stands up, looks me square on and says, *Your requirements are fair. I not know if we able make her do these things. It my word that we try with Charline. It my word that we not talk bad about you. Roland, we were friends before. I truly sorry Charline hurt you. She act evil. But Sir, I am curious, even with the letter, you cannot get an annulment here.*

I can get a legal separation and that will have to do. At least, if your daughter gets pregnant by another man, I will not be listed as the father in the Philippines! I will lose my PhilHealth coverage, and that does not make me happy but, if I can get the separation, I will have to accept that as unavoidable.

OK, OK, we try, truly.

Jomar pours each of us more beer and, nodding to each other rather than click glasses, we three then proceed to drink. Ping tells Merly to help Iren, and we three are now alone to finish the beer and a bottle of brandy Jomar had hidden behind the tree.

The beer is just a memory when Merly reappears and has words in Cebuano with Ping. Jomar becomes irate and I swear that if I didn't know him better I would have thought he was going to knock the woman to the ground. As it is, she apologizes and walks off.

I am looking at Jomar, as he is pouring himself a healthy amount of brandy, but it is Ping who explains that his wife accused me of immoral acts. I gather that Jomar was none too happy about that and that was why he tore into the woman. But then Ping says, it was when Jecim announced that you were sending her to college that Merly made the jump to immoral act.

Jomar is silent, as he drinks. Ping once again apologizes and suggests he needs to stay with Merly to make sure that there are no more problems. Jomar nods as if to give permission and I do the same.

Roland, it true, you send my niece to school? Why that? She your maid.

I have Jezryl and Vieve to work as maids. How will Jecim, and the rest, get along when I die? They may give me children. How will they care for my kids? Both Jezryl and Vieve never graduated high school and are far from it. But Myra has a degree and she may get a second. Jecim will get one and so will Jelou. They will be the money makers. It will be enough to maintain the house and raise the kids when I am gone. The kids will continue to receive benefits from the USA until they are older. That, plus what the girls can make, will be the money my family needs. That's why she needs an education.

You love my niece! Roland, I not know this! Yes I hope, but this is good news. Have some brandy with me. We celebrate!

Why does everyone want to call being caring, being responsible, as love? I have five, count them, five girls. How does that equate to love? I am worried the children of my issue should not live in poverty. Why does that mean I love the mothers?

Roland, you will give me more relatives. This is good. It also good, they will be cared for and have a good home. I think I am very lucky now.

An hour later, we are called to eat. Jomar gives the prayer before we partake in what is laid upon the tables. As is common, there is more food than can be consumed by those present. I fill my plate and go back to where I was sitting to enjoy the meal.

Jomar has not joined me, but Jelou has. We are talking about all the gossip she has gathered up since we arrived, when Iren comes to the table, gives me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

I gather you are happy Jecim goes to college.

Yes, thank you! I not afford this! Oh Roland, you make me very happy! It a better story than what happen to my niece.

You understand that I am doing it so that, when I die, she can care for the children I give her? This is OK for you?

Yes! Yes! It wonderful news. My older daughters they jealous. They say to their husbands, send me to college! But then there is laughter. Too many children and not enough money. What you do, it is very kind and very smart. Charline a very stupid woman, I think. Just like that man who leave my niece.

OK Iren, *what happened to your niece?*

You meet her before.

I don't think so.

I think yes. She play cards at your house many times. She here today. You say hello to her.

Oh, I see. OK, which one is she?

Wait! I get her.

Jelou, do you know who Iren is talking about?

Maybe yes. I think it Chelly.

That name does not ring a bell for me. You think I know her?

Yes. If it Chelly, you speak with her before.

There are many gals who come over to play cards. I do not really pay attention to them all. Jelou and I are continuing to discuss what she has gathered for the better part of ten minutes. I think the girl is just about done with all she has gleaned when Iren comes back with a gal I do recognize.

Jelou saves my bacon by exclaiming, *Hi Chelly!*

I know her, but not as Chelly... Oh fuck, of course. This is Jecim's cousin Rachele. Sure, yes, I have passed a few words with her before. She is probably twice Jecim's age, in her early thirties. If memory serves me, she has a daughter but has never been married.

Nice to see you again. Your aunt tells me that you have a sad story. Is this true?

I think yes. Maybe we both are hurt by others. Me by a Kano, and you by a Filipina.

I see. What happened?

I meet a man online. He say he like me but I need to quit school and come with him to the USA. I in hotel management four year classes, but only in the second year. I want to continue. So I say, I be yours, but first help me get

through school. He say no, he will marry and go back the USA. So I say, OK you marry other and I be your mistress but first help me with school. Then he come and we meet. We spend days together. He take me to Boracay! It fantastic. ... He buy me dresses and bikinis. He take me diving over the reefs. He not good at it, like me, but he says he has fun. He take me out to nice restaurant but we play and he say, I not wear panties! He is silly, but kind. He always kind to me. He respectful to me in front of others. ... I think OK, he mine. I know he like many women together, so I get a waitress at the restaurant to join us one night. I want him to know, whatever he want, I do. But he send me back home, he find another woman, he never go back to the USA. You know what worst?

No, what is worst?

The waitress, he take her too. She with him and the other woman. They all live here in the Philippines. Why he do that to me? I love him a lot. I do all he ask. Why that? What wrong that he leave me?

I don't know. I am sorry to hear your story. But how do you know where he is and what he is doing?

Sometimes we IM. He not help me much but a little sometimes. He say he love me but not right for him! Why?

I have no idea Rachelle. So you are still chatting with him?

Yes, sometimes.

OK, well that's weird.

It OK when I come to your house, maybe we talk some time?

Yes that is fine.

It OK if I tell him about you?

Sure.

Thank you, Sir Roland. Thank you very much. I go now.

As she walks off, Jelou is giggling. I look over at her, wondering what is so funny. I guess the girl can read my mind because I get an answer to the question I had yet to ask.

She is always arguing with some Filipina. She fight a lot. She get angry. She get excited fast and make a scene. She wrong a lot. Make problem for others. It OK that an aunt should love her niece, yes, that is correct. But, she ignore the behavior of the niece. It like watching a teleserye I think. That why the man say, not for him. You know she have a nickname now. It the name of a teleserye drama!

So she is a drama queen?

I think so, yes.

Did I really need to know this?

It is hard to know if any of the requirements I spelled out last week to Ping and Merly will ever come to fruition, but I did get a call from a local attorney yesterday asking for the details of what was needed to satisfy me.

I explained what was needed, and he suggested that, as it was my need, that I should be his client. By shifting it over to me, I would have had to pay the bastard. So I politely told him, no. This was Ping and Merly's problem. The damage to me was done. But the damage to Ping's business was ongoing. If Ping wanted relief from that, he would have to pay the bill.

The attorney was not happy but indicated that he understood the situation. Then the creep suggested that some of the work he may do might be faulty if I didn't pay for it. Such as, the affidavit confessing her actions as grounds for separation might look good on paper but fail in the courts, or the trust for the property might be faulty.

I told the asshole, Ping and Merly would pay the price of such a failure, as the agreement I made with them would be void. If the instruments they provide are faulty, the deal is not complete. My agreement with them is for these things to happen, not just an attempt to do these things. As to whether we will hold you responsible, attorney, at fault too, will depend on what Jomar and I decide once I tell him of this attempt at coercion.

That, I suspect was enough as he said very quickly that he made no attempt to coerce and I told him I disagreed. The call ended at that point.

Right now my phone is ringing and it appears to be Ping's phone.

Hello?

Roland, this Ping. Why you make my attorney quit?

He quit?

Yes. Why that?

Tell me honestly, Ping. Who went to your attorney to ask for the help? Was it you or was it Merly?

Merly go.

Ping, you have a problem with Merly. The attorney tried to coerce me into paying his bill. He said, if I didn't, that the legal work would be faulty. I told him that I was going to talk to Jomar about this attempt to coerce me. I also told him there was no deal between us if the work he did failed. At this point, if the work is complete, I will honor it as far as you are concerned, but not Merly. She is as evil as Charline.

Please there be no more problem with us. Please honor for both. I promise you, no more problem. I find another attorney. I talk to the attorney alone. I will fire the attorney I have now. Please allow this.

I tell him, the deal only covered him if there was one more problem with Merly and then we end the call.

That was a few days ago. I haven't heard from Ping or anyone else about it since the call.

Two days ago I got a weird text from someone I do not know. All it said was,

Am told you met Rachelle. Interesting girl.

I text back that she is a niece of a friend and not a girlfriend, but that, yes, I know her. I asked,

Who are you?

A past boyfriend, briefly, of Rachelle's.

You the one who took her to Boracay?

Yes. Rachelle says you have five girls living with you. Is that true?

Yes. She told me you have two with you.

Ah, she is thinking of Jun.

Who's Jun.

The waitress we met on Boracay. Yes, Jun is with me.

And there is another?

Yes. How are the five working out for you?

Fine. It's all good. And you, how are your two getting along?

All here are happy. No problems.

One of my girls tells me that Rachelle can be a real handful. She said it is like she is part of a teleserye.

Yeh, I gave her the nickname, Drama. She was all of that.

Is that why you dumped her?

Partly. The other part is that I could never trust she would do as we agreed. I don't want a slave, but I don't want intrigue, either.

So why do you continue to chat with her?

Oh, she sees me online and asks for a chat. I figure, there is no harm in that. But I do not seek her out. She seeks me out when she needs cash. I know it, and assume she is doing the same with other guys. What the heck. She was not a gal I can deal with long term, but she was fun to be with for a few days. She's got a kid she really does care about and so sometimes I give her a hand.

Your two don't mind?

I'm not sure they even know, but I don't keep it a secret. It's just no big deal around here. Rachelle has no clue what my life is really like and I am not going to tell her.

So there is more going on then you having two gals?

Yeh. But let's leave it there. I don't need any shit getting back to Rachelle. I do find it interesting that your girl has Rachelle pretty well scoped out. Are the two friends?

No. The one who told me is half Rachelle's age and is a scarily good reader of people. Rachelle is the cousin of another girl here. She comes here on occasion to play cards with others from my girl's extended family. She never comes alone and she is not friends with my girls other than to play cards.

OK, I will mention it to Jun. I don't think she will be interested, but what the heck. OK got to go now.

Fair enough. Interesting chat. Bye now.

L8R

Exactly why the guy contacted me, is unclear, but I suspect he was gently warning me off the girl. I never got his name or anything else about him. I wonder why? I do think Jelou will get a kick out of what the guy confirmed about his reasoning.

I haven't given it any thought for a couple of days, but this being Saturday, Jelou is home. I will show her the chat when I see her later today. But right now I am going to pick up the wood I have been working on. That can happen later.

I am of two minds. Are the meetings, calls and crap that I must deal with, interruptions from my efforts with the wood, or, are my efforts with the wood my way of filling up extra time between the elements of my real life? Which is the important part and which is extraneous shit?

The five wooden maidens I found in the first burl are on a ledge watching me. Whenever I am on the terrace, I feel their presence. They don't take sides. They don't scold. They just want honesty in my movements. The movements of the blade. The words I utter. The path I take in life. It matters not to them what the results are, so long as it is truth. And with that I am at peace. I look at them to appreciate, but not to befriend. They are not friends. They are truth.

Myra is working a half shift this morning. I expect her home a little after lunch. Yesterday she asked me if I might have some alone time just to talk. This afternoon may be that time. I don't know what it's about, but she didn't seem distressed, so I am hopeful that we do not have another problem.

We have not heard one word about Alida since her mom showed up here. I don't think Myra's concern regards her sister, but who the fuck really knows?

The wood continues to talk to my blade as I remove extraneous material. I feel calm and right with the world.

It is close to lunch time and Vieve calls me to wash up and eat. And so I put the wood down.

Lunch is a simple thing, a vegetable stew of sorts and rice. It is nutritious and tastes fine. It's no big deal, and I finish it quickly. I am about to return to the terrace when I see Jelou. Motioning her over I take my phone out, click through to find the chat I did with that unknown guy and indicate she should read through it and then bring the phone back to me.

Jelou has remained inside reading the texts, and I am just now back with the wood in my hands as Myra comes through the gate.

This good time to talk?

Sure, it's fine, Myra. What's on your mind?

Why you want me to go back to college? I have a four year degree! I need this for my job.

What is the degree in?

It an AB in Communication.

And are you working in the fields of media, advertising, or public relations?

You know I not!

OK, so you are not able to move ahead at Mercury with your degree, correct?

OK, yes.

So no chance to make more money, right?

Yes.

If you have a second degree, maybe you have a chance to make more money?

Maybe.

So you have your answer.

Why you care if I make more money. You not get my money. I keep it.

You want my children?

Yes, of course.

How will you afford to care for them as well as you and I might want, if you don't make more money?

Oh! You dying? What happen?

No, I am not dying right now. I am planning for the future.

That why you want Jelou and Jecim to go to college?

Yes, exactly. I want all three of you to get better paying jobs to support the family after I die.

How I do that when I am working?

How are you going to work, when you are pregnant and give birth?

OK. OK. So have babies, get another degree, get a better job?

Yes.

You not love me, why you worry about what happen when you dead?

I want my children to be well cared for. OK?

Yes, that true. OK. You are crazy, but OK. When you want me to start this?

Get pregnant. Work until you must stop and then when you are ready to start again, do college and not a job.

That appears to be the end of it. I get a kiss and she enters the house.

The wood, having never left my hands, is again consuming all my attention until Jelou comes out, places my phone near me, kisses me and returns into the house with a giggle that cannot be missed.

The rest of the afternoon passes without interruption. It is hot today, with little breeze. I have a fan running and, though I am warm, I am comfortable. It's a fine day for me, though I suspect the intense sun is not welcome for the girls, as it keeps them inside.

The scene at the supper table has me entirely confused. All have their phones out and appear to be chatting.

Hey, can you all knock off the texting until supper is over?

Myra seems to be the only one with the presence to answer. *Sorry, you right. Girls, tell them we text after supper over!*

What? Who the fuck are you girls texting?

To which Jelou answers, Rosemarie, Jecim answers, Abbey, Myra says, Joy, Jezryl says, Jovehyn, and Vieve says, *Mitch! This one is Abbey's cousin.*

A cousin to the one Jecim is chatting with?

Yes that one.

I have never heard of these people before. Who are they?

Jelou smiles, giggles and informs me. *Most Jake's girls.*

Who the fuck is Jake?

Rolie! You chat him.

Jelou what are you talking about?

The chat you give me to read. That Jake.

How do you know his name is Jake?

He tell me. I text him. I tell him I am Jelou, the one to tell you about Chelly. He ask how old am I. I tell him and he say I to text Rosemarie. He ask for my cell, because I using yours. I give it him. Later Rosemarie text me. She thirteen! She ask, who else here? I tell her and she say give me cell numbers. Hebe, all the cells here go crazy.

Is Rosemarie his daughter, or niece?

No, silly, she one of his girls! Like me. They all almost like us. Rolie, you know what different?

No, Jelou, what is different?

Jake loves them. All of them. Real love. He say it. They know it. That different. You know what the same in a weird way?

I have no idea. What?

He make them get good education. All! No exception. I tell them we have exception here, because Vieve and Jezryl not complete high school. She say I should tell you about the ALS program. They can get same as high school

diploma with the ALS certificate. Then they can go to college too! You do that now?

At this point my head is spinning. The bastard said he had two girls, right? Did he lie? I grab my phone and run back over my texts with him... damn it, he didn't. He admitted two were there but not that it was only two. That was my assumption and he never corrected it.

We will cover the rest of this after supper.

I guess not, as Myra needs to add, *Rolie, Jelou is almost right about one thing, but not exactly. The one I chat with is Joy. She in her late thirties. She not graduate high school. He not have her go back to get an education.*

Are you suggesting she is like Alida?

No! She not the boss of the house. She say others as important. She share a room with Jun. They lovers. She say all girls belong to Jake. She not interfere with that. So not like Alida.

Rolie! That not true! I talk to Mitch. She say Joy like the wife. All know she special to Jake.

Vieve, I suspect that their lives are based on different circumstances than are ours. I am sure Joy is special and I am sure Myra is right, she is not like Alida. I know it is exciting to find others like us, but let's all relax a bit and have a nice supper.

Rolie, it not just one family.

OK, Jezryl. I give up on a quiet supper. Why isn't it just one family?

The one I speak to, she from a different family and she say there many girls there too. But her guy, he is married.

Wait a second... are you saying that this guy is more like me? Married, but with other girls?

No! She with him. She OK with it. Jovelyn say she nice.

That is beyond weird, but if it works, then good for them. Like I say, each family is different.

Jovelyn say it the same in one way. All the girls do with other girls and no one do anything outside the home. We all the same that way. See? That another way Alida not like them. She tell me that her guy not want anyone below fourteen. Jake take them at twelve mostly, but sometime at eleven.

Oh Jesus, that is something I just didn't need to know. I grab my phone and text this Jake.

Loose lips sink ships! Tell all your girls to be careful what they say! Tell the guy who has this Jovelyn the same thing!

I get back a,

Roger that! Tnx.

Girls, you may continue chatting with the others, but for the next twenty-four hours, no chatting. Jake needs to get control of some things over there. You have done nothing wrong, but I have heard things tonight that I should not have learned. That means you learned things you should never have heard. Are we clear?

I get eyebrows around the table.

Jecim puts her spoon down, takes a drink of water, before asking in a plaintive voice? *You going to add more now?*

Why do you ask that?

The others, they have more.

Didn't I just get done saying each family is different?

Yes.

OK, well, we are done adding. No more.

Jelou shakes her head, looks right at Jecim and, I gather, in Cebuano, tells her that she is stupid, because Jezryl, now clearly not happy that her sister has insulted her best friend, asks, *Why you say that? She right to ask!*

No! Are you stupid too? He not want more! You not know this man? He not want girls all over, all the time. He say, go to school! Go to work. Leave me alone with my wood. Leave me alone with my brandy. He not grabbing us. He never grab us. We go to bed with him, but he not worry if we not fuck. How

many time you go to bed with him and he just sleep? Yes he hold you, but he not do sex. It OK with him. He like us. He like us more than want our sex. Why you not know this? He just not want to be hurt again. If we all here, then if one is bad and leave, we here to protect him. We protect his heart. Why you not know this? Now he know, we not leaving, so he plan for our future. He say, go to college! Why you not understand him?

Myra has been quietly eating, listening, but not interfering with the back and forth. She looks at Jelou and then me, and then Jelou, pushes some food around with her spoon, looks again at Jelou, lifts her head up and says, as if to the universe, *There times that we think people are broken. Maybe because they come from bad places. We think we need to fix them. But no, they are special. They are not broken. They are better for it. God works his miracles.*

Grim

Jelou has a new status. She has more than earned it.

I do find it interesting that I am not alone, having more than one lover. But I see no reason to want to reach out further. They have their reasons for what they are doing and I have mine. It is not a fraternity.

Jelou is right that I need my space. I need it from the girls and from guys as well. I'm just not a very social fella. That's why being an accountant was such a good fit for me. I can sit with numbers, alone at my desk all day long and not desire any contact with anyone else. Just the opposite. I needed to be left alone so I could concentrate on what I was doing.

Now, I do put the wood down when needed, but truth be told, I would just as soon not be interrupted here either. It interrupts the flow for me. I find it jarring.

The concept that I would socialize with a guy who is fucking eleven year olds is sort of terrifying. I want nothing to do with that. My girls are chatting with the other families and I will not stop it. They like knowing that there are other girls to whom they can safely talk. It seems to have delighted them.

If I tried to put up a wall between the girls in the two families, it might create more problems than it would solve.

I have spoken with both Jezryl and Vieve, about continuing their education but for now, initially both said, no. They want to be the ones who take care of the house, but they wanted to learn to cook. It turns out that to enroll in a culinary school, they need to have graduated high school or have that equivalency certificate. So I guess they will pursue it. Who knew that to take a cooking class, you have to have a high school diploma!

My cell phone is ringing but I don't recognize the number.

Hello?

I wish to speak with Sir Roland Anders.

Speaking. Who is this?

I am Attorney Santos, representing your father-in-law in a matter concerning you.

OK, so how can I assist you?

You can tell me why you require Ping to do things that are evil and against his interests.

That is a pretty strong claim you are making, Santos. Care to explain why you feel you have the right to say what you have said?

May I remind you that you have no rights here? You are not Filipino! You have no right to disrespect our culture! You are to address me as Attorney Santos!

Santos, anyone who makes the claims, as you have just done, does not have the right to expect anything else from me. You have done nothing to earn my respect. You can tell Ping that my offer has been withdrawn. We are done here. And I hang up.

I had to interrupt my carving for that shit. Man alive, what crap.

My phone rings again. It's the attorney. I don't answer it. Twenty minutes later Ping is calling. I don't answer it. An hour later Jomar is at the gate.

Roland, why you rude to Attorney Santos?

So I tell Jomar what has transpired and then get him some water to drink. He tells me he understands why I did it, but maybe I should have not hung up on the guy.

Why?

It is not respectful, Roland.

Was he respectful to me?

No, but he an attorney.

And I am his elder, wealthier, and probably better educated than he is. So why does he deserve my respect when he doesn't show the same to me?

Ab, true. You really withdrawing the agreement with Ping?

Yes.

Can it be fixed?

You mean, can Santos come here, get down on his knees and beg for forgiveness?

Sure, when that day comes, I will consider it.

You joking.

No.

Please call him Attorney Santos.

No.

OK. I will tell Ping it is not possible. And with that Jomar leaves.

What a waste of my morning. It started out so nice and now I am pissed off, in a foul mood, and don't have the composure to carve, or read. I go in and pour a beer.

One thing is for sure. I don't want to see anyone else today. The gals all have keys, so locking the gate will not be a problem for them.

Once I have locked the gate I tell the girls that I am not accepting any visitors, none. To tell all who might come that I am not available and not let anyone in. I take a folding chair and sit down in the backyard.

While I rarely go there, there is not a damned thing wrong with the backyard. I just need some peace and quiet. But my three homebodies follow me outside, wanting to know why I am acting as I am.

They have a right to know, so I go over all that has transpired.

Jecim seems scared. Jezryl is angry, but not with me. Vieve doesn't show much emotion, but suggests she be the one to deal with

anyone who comes calling. There is something going on behind her black eyes that I can't decipher.

I have no problems with your suggestion. It is fine with me, but I need to ask, why? Why do you want to do this?

Santos a pig.

Vieve, you need to be more specific. Why is he a pig?

Jezryl and me know another girl. She do what we do in the past. He take her, fuck her, and beat her up. He break her nose. He break her arm. He a pig. I happy you be this way with him.

Jezryl? Is this why you seem angry.

I get eyebrows.

Thank you for telling me. Now just give me some time to sit and find a way to relax.

Jecim wants to know if I will eat lunch. I tell her yes. She goes back into the house with Vieve. Jezryl stays behind and tells me she will rub my back and neck. It'll help me relax.

She's right, of course. It does help. The laying on of hands always helps.

Noon time arrives and I enter the house to eat. We four are sitting at the table. My mood has lightened a bit and Vieve is telling me a funny story about a priest who needed his radiator flushed, so to speak, when there is a call from the direction of the gate.

Vieve interrupts the story to deal with it. Jecim moves to the door to see and hear what transpires.

Jezryl is motioning for me to stand close to her but out of eyesight of the gate.

Sir, Ping, Santos, a guard and a policeman are there. The guard, he pointing a rifle at Vieve! They demanding to see you. Vieve say, this not happen. You not coming. Santos is yelling at Vieve! Oh! ... Vieve say, 'You be careful. I know what you do to Clarisa! You break her arm. You break her nose. Me and my friend see it. You threaten me? Ha! You should be in jail. You a pig!' ... The

policeman he ask Vieve a question about this. ... OK, she tell him more about what Santos do to Clarisa. ... He say, why Clarisa no file charges? ... OK, Vieve say, how she do that? She a prostitute. But it true what Santos do. He not have honor, why he threaten Sir Roland who do nothing wrong. It the daughter and wife of Ping, and maybe Ping too who do great wrong. ... Yes... The policeman ask what she mean. ... OK she tell him about what Charline do... she tell them that the family know from the beginning what she will do. She accuse them of conspiring with the daughter to cheat you. ... She say niece of Jomar live here. Jomar know this. He know what she say true. ... Ha! OK. The Policeman he not know this is the home of the niece of Jomar. He yell at the guard, stop pointing rifle at Vieve. Guard argue. He say Roland disrespect Santos. Roland be shown how to treat a Filipino! ... Wait. The policeman answer phone call. It stop, he is yell... leave or die! Leave now! Guard laugh, why that? Policeman say Jomar and four other PNP on their way to kill us! This man not to be harmed. Not threatened. Leave now!... Yes the policeman he leave. The others, they arguing. Guard point gun at Vieve again.

Vieve has run into the house and stands by me. Jezryl says... *they still arguing. Santos wants guard to force the gate. He says shoot the lock. Ping begging them stop. The guard say stand back. Maybe there flying metal pieces when he shoot the lock. Guard step back too. Not want to be close to the lock! Roland they will come in! ... There more arguing. Ping scream, stop! Not do this! Wait... I see flash of pulisiya⁵⁶ vehicle lights. Yes it coming. ... It Jomar and others. They pointing rifles at guard. They tell him put weapon down or die. Guard arguing. PNP officer...*

I hear a loud report. A rifle shot.

Oh my God! Rolie. Guard! They shoot him. He fall down, bleeding.

Jecim runs out to her uncle, but only as far as the inside of the gate. I step into the doorway to see what is happening.

The police are taking Santos into custody. Jecim calls her uncle over to say Ping was begging them to stop. He was not involved in the violence or the threat on me. That last part, I'm not so sure of, but

⁵⁶ Tagalog formal name for Police

as I didn't understand what was being said, I'm in no position to argue with her.

Santos is screaming about an ambulance. The officers don't seem to think it is a problem for them. They are letting the guy just bleed out. Leveling a rifle at a PNP officer is a death sentence.

Another vehicle pulls up. It is the policeman from earlier. He sees the guard on the ground, steps around the body, walks up to Jomar and reports to him and the other officers the events of earlier, or so I surmise.

Yes, that must be it as, Jomar turns to Santos and asks him something about Clarisa. The other officers stand there. Santos is belligerent. Jomar is saying something to an officer. I gather it is an order to take the cuffs off Santos.

Huh, maybe Santos has some power here. The cuffs are off. More words between Santos and Jomar. It is an ugly exchange. Jomar is clearly unhappy. Who the fuck is this Santos, that he can push Jomar and the others around? ... Oh, shit! Jomar has shot the guy, twice in the head! Fuck!

Vieve grabs my arm. She is shaking as she talks to me. *Rolie! Jomar is asking Ping if he really wants to die too. Ping swearing he not want this to happen. The guard and Santos force him to come with them. Jomar tell Ping, all the officers know what his family do to you Rolie. Jomar tell him to fix it or he die too. Jomar say, you too nice to Ping. You only nice because you foreigner. If you a Filipino maybe Ping and Merly be dead already. He tell Ping, he to say he see guard and Santos physically threaten PNP officers. Officers shoot in self-defense. ... Ping say he understand.*

Ping is running down the road. The officers load the two lifeless bodies into the rear bed of one of the four door short bed police pickups and drive off.

I normally don't drink in the middle of the day, but today is an exception. I forego the brandy and pour myself a light rum over ice, while grabbing some slices of white bread to soften the blow.

The gals get a water hose out to the street and start washing the blood from where it has pooled on the pavement. Jesus, what a fucking nightmare.

I hung up on the guy. That is all. Why did it have to end in two dead in front of my house?

Roland, you know why Jomar shoot Santos?

No. I don't have a fucking clue.

Santos say I a whore, just like Vieve. He say he will file charges for bad morals against you and accuse me of prostitution. That why he kill him.

I am not sure that killing the guy would have been my reaction to such a threat, but as Santos said, I don't respect Filipino culture well enough. Maybe Santos didn't either.

I sit down with my drink on the terrace. I am not OK. Not even close to it. The gals don't seem to be OK, either. Their faces betray intense anger. Jezryl is pounding her fist against the arm of a chair, over and over again. Vieve is walking in circles. Jecim is just staring off, into the middle distance.

It is Jecim who speaks. *Men! Why they do this to us?*

Why do you think all men did something to us? I don't understand.

Not you Roland. Us! Women! There now two widows, I think. How many children now no father? Why they kill? Why they make problems? Why they threat us? Why they so stupid?

I have no answer to that, nor do the other girls. We just sit or stand, mute and unable to come to grips with the events of the day in any sane manner.

Minutes and hours slide by. Myra comes back from work. She has evidently heard something at work. She sidesteps the blood on the street, lets herself in the gate and enters the house.

An hour later, Jelou arrives by tricycle. She seems to have no clue what has transpired. She also avoids the blood outside but, as she

enters the gate, and before she can open her mouth, Myra hurries to her and drags her inside the house.

The sun is setting now. I have been out here for hours on the terrace, unable to move, or at least unable to think of what we should do, and so not moving is the result of that confusion.

But Myra sticks her head out of the door and calls me inside to eat.

There, at last, is something for which I can move. We four wander to the table and find the table set, food prepared and ready for us. We sit at the table, mute and still confused. Before we can think to pick up a spoon, Myra offers a prayer over the food, the house, and us, as we are her family, that we be safe in God's sweet hands. We all say, *Amen*.

I am sure the food tastes fine, but I taste nothing. I only know I am taking nourishment into my body.

After supper, Jelou turns on the jazz, but I ask her to turn it off. *Not tonight, please*. Myra asks if I want my brandy. I do not. I will take some more rhum over ice. There is no good reason to waste good brandy on me tonight.

It is nine. Time for me to go upstairs, though I have not noticed the time. My cellphone is ringing. Not thinking, I answer it.

Hello?

Rolie?

Charline? What do you want now?

Don't kill them! Please?!

What the fuck are you talking about?

My parents. They say you will kill them.

Either you are lying again, or they are lying. I don't care which.

I not lie!

Why should I believe that? You lied to me for almost ten years. You're nothing but a liar.

They say unless I give you the house, the car and the land, that they are dead.

That may be true, but I did not make the threat. I don't kill.

You hire someone to kill them? Please don't!

Fuck you. I am not killing anyone. If someone is going to kill then it is not because I have anything to do with the threat.

But they will die? Please stop it!

It isn't me... but, no. I won't.

Who threaten them?

Ask them.

They won't tell me.

That's not my problem.

They say unless I do what they say, they dead!

That is between you and them. I have nothing to do with it.

But it's mine!

No Charline, it's in your name, but I paid for it. By all rights, since you left me, it is not yours. You are a con-artist and a thief.

Don't kill them.

I am just going to say this once more before I hang up. I am not killing anyone.

And I end the call. There is no reason to talk to her any longer. But now I am too much on edge to go to bed. I decide on more rum.

Eventually, I make my way to bed only to find Jecim, Vieve and Jezryl in my bed, waiting for me. I am about to tell the girls I am not up for a damned thing tonight, but they have anticipated me. Vieve explains, *Just be with us. We not want to be alone tonight.*

And so, following a shower, I manage to get into bed with them and sleep.

The next few days are uneventful, I guess, though the blood stains on the street stubbornly remain. There was some excitement over

the deaths, but it has stopped. It seems both the guard and Santos were known as hotheads and many thought it a miracle they had lived as long as they did. Santos and his bodyguard had been warned a number of times for violence against others, but the charges never seemed to stick.

That being the case, no one was prepared to suggest the officers acted in anything but a proper fashion.

There are, as Jecim surmised, two widows and seven fatherless children now. It is sad, but I am not the cause of their deaths. If you follow Filipino culture, you would say, they are responsible for their own deaths. And while that may be the case for the guard who would not drop his rifle, the matter of Santos is, for me, far less simple. Still, it was not me who killed him or asked that he die.

I don't know either widow and, if their deaths had been on the other side of the city, I surely would not have a reason to offer condolences, so I decide we should do nothing about it. We sit out all of it. The guys are both buried eight days later.

I have heard nothing from Ping, nothing more from Charline, and nothing from Jomar. The girls and I have been reserved with each other. Not cold, but not effusive. I suspect you might say, it has been a mannered way of behaving.

I have been with Jelou twice, Myra once, Jecim twice, and the dynamic duo, Vieve and Jezryl, twice. Tonight Myra is to be with me.

But that is hours from now. At the moment, Jelou is sitting on the terrace with me. *Rolie, some at school hear that the shootings happen at our house. I tell them that not true. It happen on the street, in front of our house. We not have anything to do with it. That OK?*

Yes, that's fine.

I know one of the children of Attorney Santos. He in our school. He ask me, what happen. I tell him I not know. I tell him I am sorry for his loss. He thank me for that. Rolie, you know I really know what happen, right?

No, I didn't know, but OK, I'm not surprised you do.

So you know I lie to him, right?

I do, now.

You OK with that?

Yes. I am glad you lied.

Home and homecoming

Jomar is at the gate. His expression is stern, of no nonsense. The gate isn't locked but I arise and open the latch for him. Vieve sticks her head out the door. *Sir Jomar, a glass of water?*

He gives her eyebrows. She retreats to fetch the cool drink.

In his hand he carries a manila envelope.

Roland, this Charline is nothing but trouble. The mother, Merly, the same. Both are bad. Ping come to me the day after what happen and say to me. 'My wife, she making trouble with Charline. I tell Charline, do this or we dead. My wife call her and say, "Do not do this! It a lie, no one kill us. It only threat. Not real. Do not give up what we win now."' She say, "Roland, he give up and leave. Then the house ours to have!" I tell my wife, I will kill you now. Better I kill you than I die. Yes I tell that to her.' Then Ping ask me, kill her please. Roland that a bad family.

So I am learning. What happened?

I tell him where he 'find' a gun and he go. Next day he find me again. He say, 'I hold the gun to her and tell her, "You call your daughter and say to her that I have a gun. If our daughter not do as I want, I kill you!" She do it. Then she ask me, "What if Charline not do this?" I tell her, "Then you dead. This your fault. All of it."'

Jesus, Jomar.

Vieve has been standing by us with the water for Jomar. She asks him, *Is Merly dead now?*

He looks at her, sips the water, sets the glass down, pinches his lips tightly, shakes his head, and then tells her, *No, but maybe it better if she dead, I think. She evil, that one. She call that Santos after Ping hire him! I think Ping not cause this. But he a weak man, a fool. Yes, better if he kill her. ... Miss Vieve, sorry to ask you a rude question, but, do you miss it?*

Sir?

Your past life. You miss it, maybe?

I have no idea how Vieve will respond. Will she be angry, insulted, defensive?

She smiles, sits, down on the long bamboo bench, takes a deep breath, hands on her knees, before beginning her answer. *Sir Jomar, before I come here, I think men are fools. Sex all they want. I make them do anything I want. I think I am better than them and it unfair in the world they have power, and I not. And before, I always worrying. Always I think, where the rice? No, I not miss it. You know what I learn from Rolie? I learn how to be happy. I learn men want more, not just sex. Yes they like sex. But Rolie, and I think you too, want good heart, honest life, peace, family, and I think, love. I think love must be very important. Sir Jomar, I am happy now. Never like this before. I not miss it.*

My niece say you happy, but I not understand it. I think maybe prostitutes, they always need it. You teach me a good lesson.

Sir, that envelope... it for Rolie?

Jomar gives her the eyebrows again before turning to me. *Ping brought this to me this morning. See what there, I not know. He ask if it enough. He not want to die. I tell him, it for you to decide.*

He hands it to me. It is sealed. I will not open it with my knife, Paper dulls blades. There is room to insert my finger inside the flap at the sealed part. I split the paper back at the seam. Inside there must be forty or so pieces of paper. I remove them all as they are, keeping the order of how I found them, assuming that there may be some reason for how they were assembled.

The top sheet is a notarized Power of Attorney by Charline for Merly. But it is not a US notary, which would not be legal here. It is a Philippines notary. I would have expected a seal and ribbon from a Philippines consulate in the US to make it official. Everything else might be deemed a fake if this is a fake. But then I look at the date on the PoA. She executed it a week before she left me to go to the States. Son of a bitch!

The next in order are a series of papers regarding the transfer of the car to my name. I think I will have to take it to some government

offices to get it finalized, but this may well be what she needed to do.

Below that is paperwork regarding the ownership of our house. Once again, I may need to complete things, but it may be OK. Attached to this paperwork is a letter from Charline, with her signature, followed by Merly's signature, and notarized by a Philippines notary, that all the money used to build the house, all fees and taxes paid for the house as it is at transfer came from me. The transfer is only to recognize true ownership. I don't know if this will help, but it might.

There is a bundle of papers below this that have a staple through them. On the top is the deed to the property. I read through it and there is paperwork creating an irrevocable trust for my natural born Filipino children. Of course, there are none now, but that is what I asked for. Jomar is named as the executor of the trust. But he is barred from any use of the land, or profit from it. I'll be damned. OK, I guess I may be prohibited from that role. I can check. Still, it gets it out of Charline's name.

There is one more thing at the bottom. This does have the ribbon of a Philippine Consulate General on it. It is a confession stating that Charline had been carrying on an illicit affair with a guy in the States since the very first year we got to the States, years ago. She admits she entered into the marriage under false premises to gain permanent access to the USA.

Jomar and Vieve are looking at me and waiting. I slide the paperwork back into the envelope.

Jomar asks, *Is it OK?*

It looks promising, but I have to process some paperwork to really know. But yes, it looks like it might be enough. I have to consult my attorney to know any more.

I decide to keep the details of the executorship to myself for now.

Vieve asks, *Rolie, this everything? The house, the land, the car, and maybe enough for a separation?*

Yes, if it is accepted, it is enough for separation, but not for an annulment. Jomar, please tell Ping it will require time to process the papers, but so long as he remedies any defects that are contained in what he has handed you, all is OK.

He signals his understanding, and ponders, maybe to himself, *That man has a problem with his wife. Maybe...*

No, Jomar. She has Charline's PoA. Without her, none of this is legal. Anything that needs to be fixed will likely need her as well.

Well, I must go.

Come by later for some brandy?

The good one?

Yes, of course.

He smiles, shakes my hand, bids Vieve a goodbye, and leaves.

I pick up my phone and text my attorney. I need to see her when she is available. Her secretary texts back that she is in Tacloban today but will be back tomorrow. She suggests a meeting after lunch. I text back an acceptance.

Vieve is back inside the house. I pick up the wood. My blade makes a smooth slice through an edge, and I wonder. Did I just have a hand at saving one or two lives?

I am sure I affected many lives as an accountant. People got hired, or laid off, by my work. If I made a mistake, might I have hurt someone? Did I cause them to lose a house for lack of mortgage money, or lose health insurance coverage? Did they have to move away? How many lives did I disrupt? Sure, most of them were disrupted because of a reality that was only reflected by the numbers. In that, I was only the messenger, not the cause. But what if I made a mistake, or could have found more in the numbers to change a process and save someone in some meaningful way?

We go through life, not even giving a second thought to what happens to others, as we worry about what happens to us.

Today, I did not have that luxury. That I have screwed up Charline's, and evidently Merly's, plans is not a matter of concern. But lives were in the balance. I could have told Jomar, it wasn't enough. How would he know differently?

And Charline's sworn statement of fraud.... should I send that to the US authorities? Might they strip her of her US citizenship?

The supper table is noisy. The gals want to know what is in the envelope that is currently resting in my safe. They want to see it. I simply tell them, *No*. There is nothing to see. It is only forms and documents that need to be processed.

That sort of works. I get an OK, and a, *'tell us what is in there!'*

I explain most of it. Once again, I don't mention the matter of the executor, but they know there is a trust for any kids they give me.

Myra asks, *Rolie, why you not have children with Charline?*

She said she didn't want children. So she got an IUD.

Why that?

At this point, I suspect, it was part of her plan to leave me.

You able?

I think so.

That gets Myra talking about pills they can take that makes them more fertile.

I think you need a doctor's script to get them. Here, if you are not of legal age and married, that just isn't going to happen. There is little separating the Doc's from the 'morality police.' I say as much to all of them.

In many ways, the Philippines is a very conservative place, at least when it comes to marriage and sexual practices deemed proper by the State. That does not mean that all sorts of shit doesn't happen. It does. But you do run into barriers on occasion. This is one of them.

But Myra, smiles, ... no, ... she giggles, and announces that the pills require refrigeration, and, by some accident next week, the fridge is going to fail at her pharmacy and a bunch of pills will be considered no good anymore and removed from inventory. And she giggles again.

OK, so much for the barrier.

Now the discussion is, who gets the pills first!

Myra wants all to get them right away. I have any number of problems with that. But Jelou is ahead of me.

No! If you get with child, how I get the pills when I ready to turn 16?

Yeh. That was one of the things I was thinking about. It screws things up for Jelou. Myra is making a face. So I jump in.

Myra, sweetie, you need to go last. What if you get pregnant right away but two or three of the others don't and then need more meds?

What if I get pregnant without the pills? Same difference?

OK, so you need an IUD for now.

What?

Just until we get the others pregnant or decide they can't carry.

Myra is anything but happy. She understands the logic, but she is pissed. And then she seems to have a plan.

If I get another at the pharmacy to help, or a doctor to write prescriptions, then I get pregnant sooner! I think I do this. No problem.

OK, see what you can do. In the meantime, you need an IUD.

No... wait a bit, I make a call.

Not wanting to wait a minute, she gets up from the table and grabs her cellphone.

Jecim thinks it is pretty funny. Jelou looks at Jecim, smiles and turns to me. *You know why, Rolie?*

I shrug my shoulders. I really don't have a clue.

We a family. But families need children. We not have them. OK the land in trust for the children. Even if one of us get pregnant, then we OK with the trust! So that not a problem. You own the house! That not a problem. You get the separation from Charline! That not a problem. Really, no more problem. But we all want a child. Your child. This real. We yours, but no marriage. So how we do this? A child. That how. Then it forever we connected. Charline not want because she not love you. We love you.

There it is again. But maybe I need to think about that. Jelou is right. So long as one of them has a kid by me and they all are in the inheritance of the house, they are all safe. So why would they want a child from me? All along I was ignoring the reason for why they wanted a kid. I thought maybe it was so I didn't kick them out.

Now they no longer fear that. I am not going to kick them out. And I am refusing to add others. So why are they all clamoring for my kids? It is not just Myra, and Jelou. It's all of them.

Myra returns to the table with what can only be described as a shit eating grin.

OK, no problem now. We get all we need. I get pregnant whenever.

Are you sure? I sure as hell do not want a problem for Jelou!

Yes, I sure.

OK, but we need to wait on this mad rush until I make sure all the paperwork is correct.

Jecim thinks otherwise. *No need. We do this anyway.*

The others are in agreement.

By the time I am ready for bed, every one of them, but Myra, has come up to me as I sit in my easy chair, sipping my brandy and listening to the jazz. Each tells me we need to start thinking about baby names. Jecim is no different from the others, other than she tells me if it is a boy we should consider naming him Jomar.

If each only has one kid, that means five of them! I am 67, for the love of Pete. Oh well, what the fuck. I may just need to start carving toys for the little ones.

I gather Myra has waited to say something else until later. She knows she is with me tonight. As we climb the stairs, she has a firm grip on my arm. Whether she is wanting to make sure I don't fall and kill myself, or she doesn't want to lose her place in my life, I have no idea. But neither will happen.

She is humming. I don't know the tune.

Myra is, as I have said before, remarkably good looking, and, while she is the oldest of my girls, at twenty-two, if we were in the USA, she is barely old enough to get a drink at a bar. There is no doubt she would get carded.

If I was not already married, she is the only one here old enough. Does that ever cross her mind? Does she wonder about being the wife and not a mistress?

There is not a day that goes by when I wish I knew what was really going on in their heads. I am triply denied any hint as I cannot understand what they say to each other in Cebuano, nor do they express themselves well in English, and I frankly don't believe they tell me the truth as much as they tell me what they think it is best to tell me on occasion. It is not mean lies. Yes, Charline was a mean liar, but all Filipinos see telling 'small' lies as essential for a smooth life.

If they were to rationalize it for you, my best guess is that they would say, *'Why does it matter? You get what you want and I get what I need or want. If you do not know all the reasons, who is really hurt?'* In a way, that is right and logical. In another way, it makes life more challenging for me, as I cannot predict what changes in my actions will produce in their responses, or what other choices would have been better for both of us. But perfect is the enemy of good, and they want good.

With the wood, I know what my actions produce, with these Filipinos I really have no clue. I could never have guessed that blowing off a lawyer and hanging up on him would end up in two dead at my gate. Nor would I have ever guessed that Jomar might suggest that a man kill his troublesome wife.

Tonight, the inability to read minds is less fraught with peril. Still, I have no idea what might come out of her mouth. But, even giving that, I am not expecting this.

Rolie, why you not take vitamins for your health? You live longer if you do this.

Yeh, I didn't have a clue that was coming.

Myra, companies have been selling vitamin tablets in the USA for decades. I know about them. But there is no evidence that they actually help you very much, and they can actually hurt you!⁵⁷

Why you say that? These pills approved by the government.

Yeh, well, who got paid off? Look, there is plenty of research that the common multi-vitamin isn't going to help you. Now, there is some research to suggest that folks with LDL cholesterol problems can benefit from anti-oxidant tablets. But that should be monitored by a physician.

You a kwak-kwak⁵⁸! Ha! Yes. OK, if you not want. I want you to live long. That all.

I see. Thank you for caring about me.

It important you live a long time!

Isn't that up to God?

Maybe. It hard to argue with you. Why you always right? Maybe you really wrong. Yes, I think you wrong and stubborn!

There is nothing to do but smile. Even if she is ticked off, smiling, grabbing on to her, peppering her with kisses, and being a bit silly is all that is needed to get past the moment's pique.

Once again, that method works. She pulls back, laughs and tells me I am crazy.

I don't need to tell her we will shower, take our clothing off and get into bed. For Christ's sake, we live together. It is no big deal. OK,

⁵⁷ See [Annals of Internal Medicine](#)

⁵⁸ "Quack," or fake, doctor, not a duck!

maybe it is a big deal as I am forty-five years older than is she, but there really is nothing special about it.

We get into bed and I roll over toward the lamp on the night stand to turn off the light. My back is to her, and she gooses me. I jump a little. She giggles.

Myra!

What? I not do anything.

You pinched me.

*No, I not. Maybe the espiritu!*⁵⁹

Liar!

She giggles. I put my arms around her and she shrieks. *Do not tickle me!*

I hadn't thought of it, but, as she brought it up, well now...

Rolie! Stop! She is laughing. I am laughing.

I'm not tickling you! Maybe the espiritu!

We laugh a bit more before I give her a good kiss. She responds. Our hands move, seeking the other in decidedly non-tickling mode.

I feel the rising of her breasts as my hand caresses her. I hear the sound of her moan as my fingers spread her labia in search of moisture and clitoris.

She reaches out to me and finds my dick. Damn, that's nice. Her hands feel good as they play with my equipment.

This is no seduction. This is an act of mutual caring. There is nothing to prove, and much to relish, as we both get ready for the main event.

I'm firm now and wanting inside her. She's wet and ready for me.

⁵⁹ Ghost [Cebuano] (Mumo or Mumu in Tagalog)

I'm ready to mount her when she pulls me onto her and gets ready to accept my intrusion.

She has already cum a few times as I slide in to the place that seems to always be ready for me. *Honey, I'm home!*

Reversal of fortunes

Lawyers. I find little good to say about them in general. But just like the proctologist, sometimes you have no choice. You know you won't like the experience. You know you are paying to not enjoy it. But you pay anyway and put up with the discomfort.

I have all the paperwork that Ping gave Jomar, plus the NSO⁶⁰ certificate of marriage, with me.

I walk the attorney through what Charline did to me, and then the paperwork. She takes her time, going back and forth. She asks a few questions, and looks at the papers again.

Sir Roland, what do you seek to do?

I want the house in my name. I want the property kept away from Charline and her family forever. I am not sure I like the bit in the paperwork regarding the executor, but maybe we can fix that. I want the car in my name. And finally I want a legal separation from Charline.

Not an annulment?

I didn't think it is possible.

Maybe yes. I think you are correct. Maybe it will be OK for an annulment, but maybe it will not work. Still she admits she entered into the marriage by lying. That is an admission of a crime here. But, we will start with the separation. Later, there may be a way you can get an annulment even if she is not convicted of fraud because of this admission.

I am not really sure I want an annulment. To be annulled will allow her to come back as someone else's wife. It would allow her to marry here again. Maybe a separation alone is best.

If you change your mind, maybe you can give a copy of her confession to the US officials. I do not know their law, but I believe it is illegal to lie to obtain citizenship. Maybe she has committed fraud. Maybe she get her citizenship

⁶⁰ Philippine National Statistic's Office

revoked because of fraud. What she do, it immoral. Marriage a sacrament. It against God what she do.

Hub, OK, I hadn't seen that. Can we do the rest?

Yes. I do not see a problem. It will cost some money to process the papers with all the government offices, but I have an assistant who can do this for you.

What do you want to do about the executor of the trust?

Can we get him to relinquish the executorship to the first girl who gives me a child? And can we allow for any other mother of a child of mine to be added as a co-executor?

More than one woman? Not a wife?

I didn't even consider marrying again as I didn't think it possible. And yes, in case there is more than one woman, I do not want to pick a winner and a loser. There is no one in my life pregnant now.

But you think there may be in the future?

Yes.

May I ask how many and who these women are?

I prefer not to say. As I said, no one is pregnant.

How will you be sure they are yours?

The US Embassy conducts a DNA test before verifying a 'birth abroad.' If they have a US passport, they will be mine. Also, the mother will be identified by DNA.

Very good. First, we must get the deed changed to the trust. Then, yes, I can write a legal instrument to change the executor to the mothers. But this Jomar must agree to sign the change.

As his niece is likely going to carry my child, I do not think it will be a problem.

Very good. You are in agreement? I will have my assistant handle this, yes?

How much for the assistant?

Maybe two thousand pesos now and three thousand when completed? My fee for the change in the executor will be eight hundred pesos. As there is no sale of the house or property, just a non-cash transfer the cost for that will be only three thousand pesos.

So you need five thousand eight hundred now and three thousand later?

Yes, that will be fine. The separation is not so inexpensive. I need twenty thousand to start, but you can plan that the cost will be higher than fifty thousand pesos when complete.

If I was in the States, just three hours with an attorney might well cost far more than what I just forked over. We will see how much more all, but the separation, costs me. I bet the government agencies' employees will need some grease to process the papers.

The separation will take more than six months, as there is a mandatory cooling-off period. I don't want to even consider pushing a fraud issue until I have the legal separation complete. If I do it sooner, she might get pissed off, contest the separation and then, if the annulment fails, I am screwed.

I hand over some cash and get a receipt. And now, all I can do is wait.

The gals know I was going to see an attorney, and four out of five of them are waiting for my return. When I come through the gate, I am handed a cold beer and an afternoon snack of a few hopia with caramelized onion filling.

We are all sitting on the terrace. I am feeling a vague discomfort; an aftereffect I always feel when dealing with attorneys. It seems to have something to do with the feeling of a need to take a shower.

The girls want to know the 'news.'

Other than withholding the matter of a potential annulment, all the rest is discussed. I talk about how Jomar will be the initial executor until the first one of them gives me an heir. I tell them I am working with the attorney to change the trust so the mother becomes an executor, so long as she stays with me. As others

produce children they get added as a committee of executors under the same restriction. In the end, there may be five executors.

They seem happy with the arrangement. I tell them that I will eventually put the house into a trust at time of death, but for now it will be in my name.

Jecim wants to know how fast the separation takes. I explain that the law requires a six month cooling-off period. She is confused.

OK, so how much time left?

No, it's not from when she left, it is from when I file for the separation.

Six months!

Yes. No choice.

But the house and the land, they will be ours? Not hers, right?

Yes, except that, until we are separated, she still inherits. So getting everything I can into a trust will be needed if the separation filing fails.

This is, in many ways, no different from being with Charline, They will, in the end, get it all. The exception is that they are not all going to leave me. They need security. Charline thought that marrying me and getting everything in her name here would give her all of it and then she could just leave. Of course, the US citizenship also gives her a massive leg up. With the lot and the house paid for, along with the citizenship, she figured she didn't need me. She had me skinned and nailed to the wall.

If any one of these gals were in the same position, can I really be sure that they wouldn't do the same damned thing? When I am inside them, I might, for a moment think, yes, this is love. When they, without prompting, bring me the brandy, rub my back and cook food I enjoy, yes, it can feel like love. But it is, in reality, no more than Charline without the seeming protection of a US passport and a marriage license.

This time, I have built in to the deal that they must have my child and be with me, to be fully within the orbit of inheritance. Maybe

that will keep them closer to me as I become impossibly old. I don't know. I am not sure about any of this anymore.

They are good to me. I can't fault a one of them. No, in truth, they are more than good to me. But the reason for it... what is it? Can it be love? Isn't it more reasonably understood as self-interest?

I need to not allow myself to be deluded, to succumb to the emotional need to believe in fairy tales. I can be happy that they are cared for without being confused about the underlying motivations.

But... there are times that it is getting harder to ignore the protestations of love they utter so emphatically.

No, not now, as they revel in the likelihood that this land and home is theirs. Not now, as they see their world turned topsy-turvy. Three of them whores and a whore in the making, one maid, and one pharmacy tech, all who will shortly be quasi-landed gentry. No, not now, as they realize the reality of this incredible reversal of fortunes. The wife, who had conned the old fart, gets left in the dust in favor of these unlikely survivors.

It is myth-making sort of stuff.

It is not done yet. No one is more aware of that, as am I. The separation may not be granted. It is not an immediate thing, even after the six month 'cooling off' period.

Jecim has been texting and I think I know who, as Jomar is calling my cellphone now.

Roland, Jecim tells me the paperwork is OK. This true?

No, it is not. The lawyer only says she thinks it is OK. We won't know for sure until it gets processed. And we won't know about the separation for at least half a year.

Yes, it good that you are cautious. The young ones get too excited I think.

Yes, they do.

OK, I tell Ping. Keep on praying. Say nothing to anyone. He calls me many times. Yes, it true. The man scared you will say it no good.

I am not as worried about Ping as I am worried about Merly. She is dangerous.

Ha! Yes, I agree with you. Ping must take care of her!

No! Jomar, as dangerous as she is, we may still need her.

OK. OK. Maybe we just lock her up! Yes, I see if this can be done.

Jomar, please rethink that. Maybe just let her know that if she does anything to cause a problem, it will happen that she may be found to have broken the law and need to spend time in jail. But if she behaves there will be no problem.

Roland, you too gentle. She need to understand a bit better!

There are times when it is counterproductive to argue. This is just such a time. I let it go. God only knows what he has in mind. I surely don't want to know.

I end the call and Vieve asks me if I will celebrate with them. I am not sure what she means.

We will get some Sprite and merienda⁶¹ from the sari-sari store⁶². You have some brandy maybe?

Before supper?

Why not? It a special day, I think.

Merienda? Isn't it almost time for supper?

So?

OK, sure.

Supper may be pushed back to later or never occur. It's hard to tell. That it goes against my sense of order only goes to highlight a difference in the cultures.

An hour later a family party is in progress. Iren has arrived and so has Myra's mom, Marjune. Both women seem to want me beatified. They are convinced that only saints do what I have done.

⁶¹ Snacks and breads. Can also be a light meal.

⁶² Neighborhood convenience store. Carries very basic items.

And then... and then, they do something, both of them together... have they planned it?... They tell my girls to be quiet, and then rip into them! It is a fire and brimstone sermon delivered from the arbiters of right and wrong. But as wrong as all I have done is, as might be felt in the eyes of many, it is not me who is getting the lecture. It is most definitely directed toward the girls. And it is partially done in English! I gather the two moms want me to know what is being said.

When Marjune says something in Cebuano, Iren repeats it in English. There is no way to explain this as two individuals speaking. They are speaking as one.

Girls! Shut up and listen! Yes, you have much to rejoice. This a very good day. But do not think you deserve this. You not. You not deserve it. Do not make the mistake that Charline make! Do not think this is yours. No! It not. It his. It belong to his children we hope. It not yours. Never. Never forget, this man, he good to you. Never forget, that can end if you not good to him. Yes, it good to love him. He deserve it. But love, it not enough. What if you love but treat bad. No! Love or not love, treat him good. Then all will be happy. Do not forget, he make this happy world. Not you!

Marjune then turns to me and says something loudly in Cebuano. Iren smiles and says it in English. *Make them be good. Hit them if they bad.*

What do you say after that? All I could think of is, *Will you have some brandy with me?*

What do you know? ... They do. I retreat from the supper table, where all are gathered, to the sala. The two mothers join me.

When the brandy is served to them, there is a bit of back and forth in Cebuano before Iren says, *Roland, this need ice.*

I smile and, taking a sip of mine, I ask her to trust me and take a sip as well. She gives me a look of confusion, but does take one virginal sip of warmed brandy.

The look on her face betrays both surprise and confusion. It may well be the very first time she has ever really tasted brandy. Iced

down, there is little to taste. Warm, all the fruitiness of the liquid explodes in the mouth.

Roland! What this? Not brandy!

I ask her to urge Marjune to take a taste while I get Jelou's attention and ask her to bring me the bottle of the brandy. The bottle is corked and not capped. Removing the cork I invite her to sniff the aroma as it comes up the neck of the bottle, and, then recorking it, I hand the bottle to her.

They know the brand. Fundador is the commonplace name of brandy here. But this clearly is not a bottle she has had in her hands before.

How much this?

Oh, too much, Iren. It is too expensive. But it is very good. Do you agree?

How both this and the other have the same name?

It's the same company. The other is called "Light" but this is called Exclusivo. They are different brandies from one company. The other would taste like brandy, too, if you drank it warm. But the taste isn't as good. So maybe to hide the not-so-good taste, people kill the taste with ice. I don't know.

OK. I always wonder why spend on brandy, when rum is OK and tastes better. Rum good warm too, maybe?

No. Rum is better cool or cold, unless you mix it with other things. There is a drink called a hot rum toddy, but there is honey, lemon juice, nutmeg and cinnamon in it. Some folks put rum in hot apple cider. There is something called hot buttered rum.

We not drink that.

I know. Rum alone should be served cold.

Myra say you never drunk. But you drink. Why that?

Do you like the taste?

Yes.

If you have a little each night, you would not get drunk, correct.

Yes, OK. So you drink a little. Taste good. Maybe relax a little, but not too much?

Exactly.

This not the Filipino way.

Yes, I know. I live in the Philippines, but I will never be Filipino.

That is good and bad I think. You different. Maybe we not understand you. Maybe you not understand us.

Yes, maybe.

But, mistake or not, we enjoy the brandy before the gals move back to the big table.

I am still sitting in the sala, enjoying the brandy, when Jecim and Marjune come to me. I gather Marjune wants to speak and needs an interpreter. She has selected Jecim, and not Myra. I find that interesting. The conversation is mediated therefore, but I will write it down as if Jecim is a mere conduit.

Roland, maybe I make mistake.

Oh? What mistake.

I have problem with Alida.

In what way?

We fight all day. It always fight. Her girl hear all this. Bad for the child.

I'm sorry. I'm sure both you and Alida are very unhappy. But, as you know, I found Alida difficult and a very bad fit for this house.

Yes, yes. She not good here. She not good with me. She is difficult. Analiza, she cry many times. She not want to hear the fight.

Maybe Alida should just be on her own.

See you not know our culture. No I not tell her to leave. She is the daughter. If a man want her... yes that OK, but not without that. If a man want her, I say, go be with him, but not in this house. Yes that OK. But no man want her. She too difficult.

So, if keeping her at home is not the mistake, what is the mistake?

Her child. My granddaughter. I say she should be with her mother. Same like you say.

And?

That wrong. The child need to be where no fighting.

You have a son who is married. She can go there.

It no good. Jojo say no. He not want it. If he take the child, Alida cause problem for him.

You have relatives. Everyone in the Philippines has relatives.

No one want to do this. The child not want this.

There is activity out by the gate. It seems like we have a contingent of Jecim's siblings and her nephews and nieces arriving. Each appears to be carrying some food. Some in pots, some in trays. Two brothers are carrying in cases of soft drinks in bottles. Rachelle has come with them.

A multi-cab arrives with a big videoke machine, and some guys are setting it up on the terrace.

I look over at my girls. All I see are happy faces. What I do not see is guile.

Rachelle walks in the front door, spies me, approaches and greets me. *I think I am not lucky, but I am happy for you and Jecim. You do a good thing.*

I smile. What the fuck am I supposed to say? *'If you weren't so difficult, your life would be very different,'* really? I mean, here I am talking about Alida who is difficult and I am not allowing her in my door. How is that different from this Jake and Rachelle? *Yes, Jecim and I are very lucky to be together.*

Rachelle excuses herself and I am more than happy to see her go.

Marjune chuckles. *She and Alida, they know each other. They fight many times. Both girls the same. Both difficult, I think. She have a daughter the same age, same school.*

I didn't know about the daughters knowing each other, but I am not surprised by this. *So the mothers must see each other quite often.*

Yes, all the time. Oh, the fights! Such language! That why I want the child away from Alida. It need to happen.

I see.

Yes, Analiza love her aunt.

But I thought you said that your son didn't want the child.

Not her! No! Analiza's other aunt.

Who?

Myra!

Family Days

No! No way! Does Myra know about this?

Roland, please.

Marjune, does Myra know about this?

No, I not tell her. This between you and me, I think.

Well, you have that much correct, but you left out Jecim, here! Marjune, I know you are a very good woman. I know you only want what is best for your granddaughter. Allow me to tell you, I do too. And because I only want good things for her, I must tell you, this is not a good place for her.

Roland, I chat Myra every day. Maybe you know this?

No, but there isn't any reason why I would know.

Yes, it true. We chat. I ask, 'You fight there?' She say, 'Dili! It not happen.' I ask her, 'Roland truly good to you?' She say you are good to all. You not pick a favorite because all are favorite! I tell her, I not think it possible. She say it true. Today she tell me what you do for all. I not believe this when she first tell me. I say to her, you not marry him, so why he do this? She tell me she think it is love, but that you will deny this. She is very lucky. They all very lucky. This a good home. You a good man. Analiza need this.

Marjune, I really don't want to go into detail about why this is not a good home for your granddaughter. But it isn't. She will see things that a child should not see. She will learn things a child should not learn. It will change her from the sweet granddaughter into something else. I do not want to see that happen.

Why Jelou here, if this wrong for children?

Do you know who Jelou's mother was?

No.

She was a prostitute who earned her money at home, sometimes while her daughters were there. The mother was a bad woman. She even offered her daughters to men. Jelou's life was a sad one, long before she came to this home.

Nothing that she might see or hear here could damage her. For her, this home is safety. For Analiza it is not.

So it true what Alida say will happen to Analiza if she come here? That not talk to scare her?

I do not know what Alida told you, but I never lied to Alida to scare her away. I did try to scare her away by telling her the truth.

She is quiet for a bit. She looks around the room at the happy, joyful faces. She reaches a hand out to my check, and puts her palm on it, before turning to Jecim and evidently asking something to which Jecim responds. I don't have a clue what is being said, but when Jecim finishes her response, Marjune simply nods before turning her gaze back to me. There is a calm but earnest expression on her face.

Roland, maybe you not know but many girls here marry early. In the old days, men here have as many wives as they can afford. These wives are young. Maybe twelve or thirteen when they marry. It true we Christian now and not do this. But still it happen here. Girls go to men early here. Yes it happen. What you do, it like a dowry to your girls here. You do right. I think more. I talk with Myra and Analiza.

You have two other people who have to agree.

Who?

Alida and me.

Ha! You on Alida side?

I smile, and shrug my shoulders. It does sound a bit odd at that. Still, I sure as hell don't want this.

Marjune is not a simple soul. She is a power, and that presents a bit of a difficulty. She doesn't want to make an enemy of me, and I have the same concern about her. Somehow, I expect dancing around with her is not the best option.

I am thinking about the time I found what looked like a real problem on a balance sheet, many years ago. I was young then. The company's CFO was a real pain in the ass, and scary as hell. The

problem was one that had gotten his signature as it flowed through the process.

I guess I could have ignored it but, if I did, I decided I would never be able to look in the mirror and not feel compromised. I knew it might go badly for me, but I walked in and said, *'This may not be a problem, but it looks like a big one to me.'*

I placed the documents and the related sheets on his desk and went to leave. He told me to wait while he reviewed it. I stood there for a good five minutes. It felt far longer, but it couldn't have been more than that. And then he looked up, and said the damnedest thing. *'Good. Damned right. This is wrong and we're going to fix it. Come with me.'*

We walked down the hall to the CEO's office. He sat down. I stood behind him as he told the CEO, *'Bob, I screwed up on the Meyers contract. I didn't catch it. Roland here just walked into my office and respectfully showed it to me. I blew it. We can fix it and I will. But you need to promote this guy. I can't afford to lose him.'* And from that moment on I had the CFO's trust as well as a nice promotion to a nicer office, a better computer, and a bigger desk.

It doesn't always work out that well, but I have always been able to look at myself in the mirror without cringing.

Marjune, you should absolutely speak with Myra. I am going to change my mind a bit and put my decision in your hands. But only after you hear me out, and are able to answer these questions with absolute yes's. If you can answer all four questions in the affirmative, then I will say OK.

She gives me a smile and eyebrows. She is waiting for the questions.

Do you really want me to take Analiza, a twelve-year-old child, as a mistress? Do you understand that she will also learn to have sex with the other girls in this house? Do you understand that this is how Myra lives with me now? Is this what Analiza wants?

Why you ask me this?

Because, if Analiza comes here, I never want to hear from you that you weren't warned. And I never want to hear that Analiza is here against her will.

These two things will happen to her? Sex with you and the girls here?

I am not saying they will. I am saying don't place her here if you are not willing to have it happen. There is sex here in the open, between me and the girls, and between the girls. Analiza is going to see it and will likely experience some of it. I have told you, I do not think this is a good place for her. I am assuming Myra has not been fully honest with you about what happens here. If you were not trying to place Analiza here, there would be no reason for you to know. But, your desire to do that, makes it necessary.

Maybe I thought that she become a mistress when she get older, but I not know what happen here. This true. It fair to ask, what Analiza want. OK. I talk to Myra and Analiza. Maybe Analiza need to talk to you. I will see. Thank you for respecting me. You a very different man, but you honest. I agree. If Analiza come, it because I say this OK. This true even if Analiza want to come. If I say no, then she not come.

Exactly.

You want me to say, no. Correct?

Correct. I do not think this is a good place for her. But I am not her guardian. ... I should make one other thing clear. Alida will never be allowed to join me. That is not to be discussed. If Analiza comes, it is without Alida, and that cannot change.

I understand.

We put the conversation behind us. I lift up the snifter and take another sip.

Eventually, Marjune moves off to rejoin Iren and the other gals. Jecim is clearly troubled.

Rolie?

Umm?

What she want. It not right.

I agree. What did she ask you?

She want to know if Analiza be safe here. I tell her you are a good man but this is not a place for a little girl. She think this is a better place for the child.

You tell her, no?

I tell her, I not able to explain why, but she wrong. But then you make her see, I think. I surprised when you asked her if she want her granddaughter to have sex with everyone here.

What choice did I have? I wonder what Analiza will say if she knows this. I have no idea but doubt she will want to come.

You right. She kisses me on the cheek before walking back toward the others.

And so, I am sitting alone again, and finishing off my brandy, when Jelou joins me, and decides to sit on my lap.

Rolie, what she want?

She wants Analiza to live with us.

No! You tell her, no? Correct?

I tried. I had to tell her about what our life here is like. She thought I was just trying to scare Alida when I said those thing before.

She know it not right now?

She isn't sure. She's thinking about it.

Rolie, she too young!

I know. But if the kid is here, she is going to see sex. She is going to see it just about every day. Marjune was pushing hard. I don't want to make an enemy of her. Better if she knows why I say, no.

Good. OK, good. But if she come, I teach her so she OK with it and not have it be bad in her head.

Let's hope we never have to deal with that.

The rest of the evening is a party. I eat what amounts to a supper. Eventually, I take my book, and leave those assembled to carry on, as I retreat to my bedroom, with yet another brandy and my jazz.

Having already showered and turned off the lights, I am under the sheets and sleeping when Jelou crawls into bed with me. I must not

have been sleeping too soundly, as I am aware of her presence. I reach out to bring her to me. She seems happy to comply, as she drapes an arm over my chest.

Am I the youngest girl you have ever been with?

Yeh.

Jezryl say you think I am too young, before I come.

True.

But I not too young, right?

Bad question.

Why?

Your life before you got here, was filled with bad stuff and sex from a very early age. Right?

So, because I see sex, do sex before I come, it different?

Yeh.

OK, so maybe this girl need to do sex first?

No! Jelou, it was not good to take away your childhood from you. I don't want to do that to the girl.

You think I hurt? I not hurt!

Oh, bullshit. Remember how you said your stomach used to feel?

Yes.

Well that is not normal. It should not have been that way for you.

But I happy now!

Yes, but only because you were in pain before. This kid is not in pain. Let's not give her any pain.

You think I smart about people, correct?

Yes.

So, how that happen? I get good that way because of my life.

*You got good that way because you are very special **and** because you were hurt. Most people are not special like you.*

I think this girl be OK, if I teach her.

And if you are wrong? I don't want to take someone's life and future in my hands like that.

You say things bad where she live, right?

That's what Marjune says.

Maybe her stomach hurt now. Maybe she need us.

Jelou, you are wonderful and I never want to lose you. I am very happy you are here, but there needs to be another answer for this kid. She is not you.

Jelou giggles, kisses me, and whispers, *Maybe she is better!*... before sliding down and taking me orally.

Nah, there isn't anyone better! Damn, she's good at this. Too good. It is hard to remember that Jelou is a fourteen-year-old girl when the lights are out and she is doing, what she is doing, to me. Charline was not nearly as good at giving head as is Jelou. She was never as sure about her body as is Jelou. She was never as sure about how to touch me as is Jelou.

So here I am. Jelou is doing things to me that I just can't explain. It's like her throat has muscles and fingers. And, at this moment, I swear she is the only one in the world for me. At this moment, I am convinced she is mine forever. At this moment, it sure as hell feels like she is in love with me. But, she is not; she may not be; and why do I feel that?

My emotions want to take me to a place that just isn't there. But it feels like cheating to not feel love, and get what I am getting from Jelou. I want it to be what it simply cannot be.

But, God Almighty, she takes me to somewhere I cannot explain. She keeps me there until I give her the proof she wants. The proof that she is able to have me for lunch.

I haven't done anything for her, but that is not what she wants. She wants exactly what she has accomplished. And accomplished it has she ever. I have hardly moved, but I am out of breath.

And now, having completed what she set out to do, she slides back up, places kisses on my neck and strokes my chest. And yes, it feels very good.

Rolie, Saturday is family day at school. Will you come please?

What happens at family day?

Each class has a color. We are to wear yellow shirts. We compete in sports, races, contests. We have food there. It a good time and I not have family except for you and Jezryl. Please come!

OK, when does it start?

It start at ten and end in afternoon.

I am too old for the races, sports and contests.

Yes, I know, but nice you be there.

Yes, I will come.

Good! And Rolie?

Yes?

My math teacher, I think she pretty. I have a crush on her.

Jelou, I am not adding anyone.

Yes, but not for you silly. I have a crush on her. You angry or jealous?

You leaving me?

No!

It's a girl and not a guy?

Silly, she very much a girl.

OK, then, I am not jealous.

Good! If I seduce her but no blackmail, this OK?

I don't know. Is she married?

No she not.

You are not to trick her in any way.

OK, I promise.

Good.

Thank you for allowing!

I just did that, didn't I, ... OK. Be careful, Jelou. If she falls for you, have you thought of the problems you may have?

Why she do that. It just sex.

It may be far more for her.

Oh! OK.

I get a few more kisses and then a, *Goodnight, Rolie*, before we drift off.

Saturday does roll around and five of us, Jelou, Jezryl, Vieve, Jecim, and I, are at Jelou's school for this 'family day' in our yellow shirts.

For me it's a little boring, and a little weird as I am introduced a few times as Jelou's guardian. This is just a little hard to swallow, but the truth would be impossible.

We have brought all we need. We have a cooler filled with food and drink.

The gals are having a good time and one always stays by me, though why I am not sure.

A little after lunch, Jelou, who has been missing for the better part of an hour, I gather in a volleyball tournament, appears with a very pretty older girl, whom I have never met before.

Miss Bañas, this my guardian, Sir Roland. Rolie this my math teacher Miss Bañas. She the one I tell you about.

The gal looks a little uncomfortable.

It is very nice to meet you, Miss. I assure you, Jelou is not trying to fix you up with an old man such as me. She just thinks you are wonderful and very pretty. On that last part, I must say that I agree. My ward certainly knows what she is talking about when she says you are remarkably attractive.

Jelou, I can't believe you say that! And Sir Roland, it is very nice to meet you. I promise, you are not too old!

You, Miss Bañas, either need glasses or are a gifted liar! What are you, twenty or maybe twenty-one?

Yes, Sir. I am twenty-one. But please call me Martia.

OK Martia, I am Rolie... and I am forty-six years older than you are.

You look very young. I sure you will live a long time!

Oh, Martia, you are sweet. But I am taken. However, I think your student is fond of you and wishes to spend more time in your presence. If you agree to it, I will be very happy.

I get an odd look from the gal. And then she turns, says something about the next race and they both launch off across the field.

Why you say you taken? You not!

Yes I am, Vieve. Isn't the five of you enough?

You not married to us. To be taken means married, or at least engaged! You separated. You not taken.

Technically, I am not legally separated, not yet, and anyway, I am not talking about the law, I am talking about the reality of my life. I am talking about how I feel about you and the other four of you.

Really?

Yes.

She plops a piece of jackfruit in her mouth, chews, swallows, and simply says, *Good.*

There is no question that Martia is a looker. So does Jelou have gaydar⁶³, or does she think she is so much of a *mata hari* that she can seduce her teacher in spite of it? It's one thing to partake as a bi-lover in my house, but here there is no man. Yes, she seduced Ermei, God rest her soul, but was that just luck?

Should I have told Jelou to not pursue the teacher? I could have, but, these gals can leave me if they want. I am not going to be a jailer. If they don't bring me problems, don't fuck other men, and don't whore around, well, I guess they are free to do as they please.

If this is a sort of innocent crush, I would just as soon be seen as Jelou's friend and confidant and not the 'parent.'

⁶³ The ability to recognize homosexuals through observation or intuition.

Of butterflies, bees, and birds

Family day is thankfully over and we are driving back to the house. I think we will all want to know how it went with Martia, later in the day.

Jelou hasn't said a word since we got in the car. No one wants to push her. And then she says, *Thank you, Rolie.*

What are you thanking me for?

What you say?

What part of what I said?

You say you taken. I like that. It means we really your girls and you ours. I like you tell her, pay attention to me. Yes, I like that. You surprise her I think. She not sure what you mean, but she do it. We spend rest of the time together. I learn about her. She tell me things she not say to a student. ... Rolie she not have a boyfriend. She like to watch the beauty contests.

Oh, Jelou, I haven't met any Filipina who doesn't like to watch those things.

No this different. I sure of it.

OK. What else?

She interest in you. She ask about why you here. She ask about how you live. She ask about your habits.

You told her I tell the truth, I am taken, right?

Yes, of course. She say how that? Wife gone. I say, it true. She just look at me, funny. Then she say, 'You live with him? He your guardian?' I tell her this true, but he think it OK if I visit her at her home. She say it not good. She live with her parents. If she visit me outside school it be at our house so others not talk bad.

I have no idea what to say. I really don't want the gal in our house, but it seems that it is the only option. Vieve offers a suggestion, and I guess it is good advice.

Take her right into your bedroom. Don't hang out in the rest of the house. Then she doesn't see how Rolie is and she not really see how we are. When she coming?

She want to come tomorrow afternoon. Rolie that OK?

I really don't want this, but I don't want to throw rocks at Jelou's feet either.

OK, but she doesn't stay the night. So it needs to be over by nine at night. OK?

OK. Good.

And, for a moment, I get a respite before the next issue is standing right in front of me on the terrace, once I park the car. I gather she has been waiting for me to return before the screaming starts.

What you say to my mother!

Myra, did you have a good day?

Rolie! What happen yesterday? Why you tell my mother it OK Analiza come and we fuck her?

I didn't.

You did!

No, I didn't.

Mother not lie! You say this!

Then your mother either misunderstood me or the translation she got from Jecim. I have no control over what she believes, but I told her clearly and without any exceptions that I did not want your niece to live here. I told her that if she thought it is OK that her daughter might well be fucked, she would still have to convince you!

Why you say that to her?

Because she insists that the child needs to come here. She is convinced that living with her mother and grandmother, who are continually fighting, is bad for the child. She says Analiza loves you and would be happy to live here with you. I told her that it is a very bad idea, without saying why. ... She continued to insist, so I told her what life is like here, and, therefore, why the child should

not come. She suggested I am just trying to scare her, so I said, ask Myra. Ask her if that is not what happens here, and ask her if she thinks it is a good idea for the child to live here. ... I told her if, after knowing what happens here, and what might well happen to the kid, that she still wants Analiza to live here, she would still have to convince you that it is a good idea, and she would have to tell the truth to the child and see if the child wants it to happen. ... Myra, I'm opposed to it, but it is up to her and you to put the child in jeopardy, and, even then, only with the child's knowledge and permission!

OK I call her back.

And with that she hurries into the house, I gather, to grab her cellphone.

Jelou is snickering.

Jezryl is a little put out by the snickers and asks her younger sister, *What do you think is so funny?*

Myra, why she not know Rolie? He not want the girl. We all know this. Why he change now? It not make sense. If she think, she know the mother not tell all. I know what happen last night. She too busy playing cards to see Marjune talk to Rolie about it. She too busy with cards to see him say, No! ... This how problem start. Rolie not change. He tell us, we need to believe he mean this. ... Maybe I disagree with Rolie. It OK to say, 'why that?' He not get mad. That OK. I do that last night. We talk about it. But Rolie think it a bad idea. That not change.

Jezryl is confused. *You think the kid OK to be here?*

If it bad at home like Marjune say, why not? Sex not bad. Fighting is bad. Rolie say sex bad if you too young. It not bad. I OK and I do it at her age.

Not fucking. Jelou you not fuck then.

No, but the other. It OK. I not hurt. I happy now. So why it bad for her? Rolie say we different.

I am here, but, oh hell, let them talk as if I were not. I have picked up the wood and started carving. Let them hash out what they need.

Eventually, they walk into the house and I can pursue my efforts alone and in quiet... for a few minutes anyway.

Myra has rejoined me on the terrace. I am on a particularly minute and intricate piece of carving and I don't want to stop in the middle of it. So I ignore her for a bit, until I can come to a logical stopping point.

Yes?

I talk to mother.

And?

You tell the truth. She admit what you say happen. Why she lie to me before?

To get the answer she needed.

Oh. Really?

It's a guess, but it's a guess with some experience behind it. What did you tell her?

I tell her that what she want is wrong. You know it wrong. I know it wrong. She say, OK, maybe she think it more. I say what she need to think for? It wrong! She say, maybe not as wrong as what happen there now. She say it very bad there. So I say, OK. If she think it better, and Analiza want, I will allow it. But she must believe that we both think this is very wrong to do. She say, OK, she believe I speaking for love of the child. She know it not meanness that I say, no. ... That OK, Rolie? You not mad?

It's OK. I think you did the best you can do.

She gets up and I get a kiss before she leaves the terrace. I only have about half an hour of good light before I need to put the wood down for the day.

There is a trade-off in a weird way, related to the number of messes I deal with at one time.

When Charline and I were together, we could go for months without anything really needing resolution, other than who to invite over and what restaurant do we want to try for the first time. Life could damned sure be so even that it got boring, but it was stable,

calm, and predictable, up until that moment when it was totally fucked up.

Now, I don't think anything is going to get fucked up. Any of them can leave without destroying my world, but there always seems to be some issue needing resolution. Anyway, it sure feels that way.

In some ways, not much has changed in my world. I am living where I have now lived for a few years. No great mysteries exist. I am not on a great and epic adventure. I will make no history. It's sort of like the premise of that TV show I used to watch, what was it?... *Sienfeld*, I think. Is that how the name is spelled? Hell, I don't remember.

My life now is a story of nothing. I sit. I carve. I eat. I drink brandy. I sleep. That's about it. Nothing is happening, and yet there is always some little thing, up in the air, unresolved.

It is all pretty small stuff as far as my life is concerned now, at least mostly. Yeh, sure, if the shit about the separation goes badly, any future progeny get screwed... but hell, I will be dead, right?

Am I minimizing? Two men were shot dead outside the gate. Surely that is no small thing. And Ermei... I did have a hand in all that. If Jelou had stayed in that home, would Ermei have killed herself? Three deaths aren't nothing, and yet, it is not me and my life.

Is my need to have more than one female in my life a catalyst that created the chemistry that bubbled and resulted in these dead souls? Is this the butterfly effect? I am doing nothing, or, at least, very little and yet my presence so disturbs the world as to create these massive disturbances?

Damn, I wonder what has put that bee in my bonnet, and... How long have I been day dreaming? I need to stop carving. The light is gone.

The rest of the evening is without any excitement. Jecim and I spend the night together. She tells me I am tense and gives me a massage. I fall asleep before she is done. I suspect I was not as tense as she thought.

Sunday is here and the rain is pouring down. It has been raining since late last night. There's a strong breeze accompanying the rain. It's actually cool outside. The gals are bundled up. I put socks on, something I rarely do. Somewhere I have some long sleeve shirts, but I don't know where Charline stuck them a few years ago.

Sitting on the terrace sure as hell requires no fan today. Lunch isn't for another two hours when a tricycle pulls up and discharges Martia. *Ay-oooo! Ay-oooo!*

Before I can arise, Jelou is dashing out to the gate and escorting the gal in. But, as Martia is about to pass me, she halts, blushes and greets me.

Good morning, Sir.

Martia, I thought we agreed yesterday that you would call me Rolie.

I sorry, but it hard to call a person such as you in that way, Po.

Jelou, do you call me Po or Rolie.

She laughs. *Rolie.*

Well then, work on your friend here. She needs to lighten up a bit.

Sir, why do you call me Jelou's friend? I am her teacher!

Martia, at school you are her teacher. When you come her, you are her friend.

We are happy for that. If it isn't a problem for us, why worry?

So now, she is both blushing and unsure of what to say. Jelou uses the confusion to pull her into the house.

I can't help but chuckle at the discomfort the girl is experiencing. God only knows what she will be experiencing after a few hours in a bedroom with Jelou. That kid is flat out dangerous.

I return to the wood. Who will you be? What do you have to tell me?

As the sun leaves us for the night, we have not seen Jelou and her visitor since mid-morning. Myra wonders when they will decide they are hungry. Vieve tells all assembled that, at times like this,

hunger is forgotten. Jezryl agrees. Jecim just doesn't know what to think, but says she is sure none of her school teachers were *'this way.'* Vieve laughs and comments that it's only because they had not met Jelou!

I need to go up and clean up for supper. I normally just come down when I am done, but today they will call out, *'Kaon karon⁶⁴, Rolie!'* They are in hopes that we might let the two in the bedroom know two things. What time it is, and that there is food to eat.

It actually seems to have worked. About twenty minutes after I descend the stairs for supper, we see the two of them. They are properly attired but, from the look of things, it seems that Martia has just brushed her hair. Jelou has different clothing on, and a smile as big as you please on her face.

As they seat themselves, and load up their plates with rice, and some toppings, Jecim pours them some water in glasses before placing it in front of them.

I decide to break the ice with a sledge hammer. *Well, you two seem to have enjoyed yourselves.*

Martia is fumbling, blushing, and just about ready to cry. I sure didn't mean to do that to her, but Jelou calms her in the only way that makes sense. I think she agrees that what has transpired needs to be acknowledged here, or it will be very awkward going forward.

Relax! They all know what we do. No one upset. They happy for us. This my family. They know how I feel about you. They know what I hope happen. Rolie see I change what I wear. It tell him what we do. He happy for me. Ask him!

Sir, what Lou say, this true?

Yes. It's true.

But maybe you think this illegal.

⁶⁴ Eat now! [in Cebuano]

I think that no one in this house is ever going to say that. No one is going to discuss it outside this house. No one inside this house thinks it is wrong. We know Jelou, and are happy for her.

She is blushing deeply now, and once again almost crying. *But I not lesbian.*

So? We are not judging you. I only ask that, for the time you and Jelou are intimate, you not engage in sex with any man. I do not want Jelou to contract a disease by accident.

Now the poor dear is ready to piss her pants. I am quite sure this is the first time in her life she has ever had this type of conversation.

Yes, Sir. I promise this.

Good. I bet you are hungry. So eat!

I get grins from Jelou, Jezryl, and Vieve. Myra is a bit lost as to why this was all necessary. Jecim is just looking at me, as a wife looks at a husband, when he does something she just wasn't prepared for. I have seen that many times before. It is neither good nor bad. It is a reshuffling of her understanding of her mate. She will not be surprised next time.

After dinner I relax in the Sala and the girls, sans Jelou, clean up the dishes and the kitchen. Martia and Jelou have once again removed themselves to a bedroom.

I am about ready to go upstairs for the night when Martia and Jelou appear again. Once again, Martia comes to me rather than a direct exit out to the gate.

Sir, ... Rolie, I not understand you. But you are very kind to me. Thank you.

Have a good evening, Martia. I am sure we will see you again.

Yes. Yes, this is true. Good night.

Good night.

Jelou is happy. She may belong here, but she is still a kid and she will have crushes. Vieve thinks that a crush on a boy would feel like cheating to Jelou, but not so a crush on a girl.

I ask Vieve why Jelou doesn't go after a classmate. Vieve's theory is that to do so invites gossip and backstabbing, especially after the breakup. When having an adult lover, she is far less at risk. Beside, all Jelou has ever known is adult sexual intimacy.

I guess that makes sense and I decide to leave it alone. But if Vieve is right, then Jelou sees herself just as any wife does, in one way. She already has her guy.

The next two months are interesting in only one way. Nothing is happening. Nothing has changed. Nothing. Oh, I continue to add carvings to my collection, but there is no word at all from Marjune. I have no word from the attorney I hired. The relationship between Martia and Jelou is a Saturday and Sunday thing. But I do not allow an overnight here. Martia must be out of the house by nine each night.

I am supremely happy by this lack of excitement! I love the routine, the commonplace, the uneventful.

But the uneventful must and does come to an end. In this case, it could be a lot worse. The attorney has succeeded in processing the change in the ownership of the house, the car, and the deed for the land. The "trust" has been set up, and now we need to get Jomar's signature on the trust paperwork whereby the mom's get to take over the executor position as they give me issue.

I have the paperwork, but need Jomar to sign it in front of a notary. I think this is a job for Jecim. Let Jomar deny the signature to his niece. Nah, I don't think that will happen.

I catch Jecim separately and explain how the trust works right now and how it will work once she gets the signature. It takes a bit of going over the exact language on the document with her before she gets the full implication, but, once she does, I get a kiss that is at least outsized for the request I have made... At least, it seems outsized to me until the other shoe drops. Jecim is pregnant.

Singing the blues

Well, how about that? There wasn't any way Jomar wasn't going to sign, once Jecim caught up with him a few hours ago and told him she needed his signature so she could be an executor of the property for her unborn child.

Hells bells... according to Jecim, he just about broke land speed records getting to the attorney to sign.

So it's done, and now, so long as there is a live birth, even if the court denies the separation, when I die, Charline can't inherit the land. With my will, she was not going to be able to get the house, but now the land is out of her hands. too.

It's a damned good day! Still, I want to get the separation before the birth of the child. I call the attorney and press her on pushing the separation through, the moment it can be done. She promises she will do it. We will see.

Tonight at supper, I inform all that the paperwork for the house and the land is complete and we have the final documents back. It is now official, as is the announcement of a pregnancy. There will be no party now, but there is a lot of playful stuff, a lot of laughing, a lot of happiness.

Once again, we have a period of calm. Man, do I ever like calm. This one lasts until almost the end of the school year. It's a Saturday afternoon, a week short of that, when screaming from inside Jelou's bedroom erupts, followed by Martia leaving in a damned hurry, with Jelou screaming at her, right behind her as she runs out of the house.

Once Martia is gone, Jelou starts crying. I go over to her and put my arms around her. *It's OK, honey. Couples have fights, but they get over them. I don't know why you got angry with her, but she will learn and fix it. It'll be OK.*

She is holding me tight, crying, and shaking her head. I don't say any more. I just hold her.

It takes a while, but she releases me, backs off a bit and asks, *Rolie, tell me the truth. It OK if we not have sex anymore? You still send me to college?*

Of course. Sweetheart, you never have to come to my bed. I thought you knew that.

OK... but this still my home, even with no sex?

Yes, Jelou. This is always your home. It's OK. I understand. No more.

No! No you don't! I want to be in your bed.

Hub? What's this all about?

Her! Her! She want to trick you. She say, we can get what we want from you and dump you. I tell her she evil! Rolie, she want me to help her get into your bed so she can win you and get rid of the others. She want the house, the land. She want to trick you. I tell her to get out! Never come back. No one allowed to trick you! We love you. She confused. She say, why I protect you. You old. Why bother. You only good for what we can get!

Jelou is crying again. She grabs on to me, and, talking into my shoulder, she asks, *See? I know you love me. You send me to college. It not matter if we have sex. Who do that if it not love?*

We are surrounded by the rest of the household. They have said nothing, until now. But it is Jecim who asks, *She right Rolie, who send us to school, give us children if we want, not require us to have sex if we not want? Who do that if it not love? How that, Rolie. Tell us.*

I don't know what to say. Is this love? I have been so sure that there is no such thing. I have been sure that it can't be, that I set things up in a way it is impossible to see it in that way. They were getting things for staying. So it was in their self-interest to stay. But what if they have been telling me the truth. What if they will put my interest ahead of their own? It hasn't been needed, so how can I ever know for sure?

Are they right about me? Do I love them? I have been steadfastly denying it. How many times have I said the only thing I can trust is the wood? But, regardless of that, have I done things that are out of

love, or is it just out of decency? Fucking a fourteen-year-old is hardly a decent thing to do, so attributing decency to my actions seems like too far a reach. But, if it isn't decency, it must be love... right?

Shit, I am lost, as lost as the day I was when Charline left me.

I don't know what to think. I hold on to Jelou with one hand and reach out to the others with the other arm. I don't know. I just need to be with them.

I just spend the rest of the day, sitting, my mind wandering down alleys of confusion and contradiction.

This house holds five girls, from pretty to amazingly beautiful. Each of them is a bedmate, a lover, a caregiver, a friend, and each swears to the Lord above that she loves me. So why do I feel so completely alone? It makes no sense. None at all, and yet, that is how I feel.

Eventually, I stand up and climb the stairs toward my bedroom, alone. Jelou asks if she can join me. *Yes, but no sex tonight. OK?*

Yes, of course. We just hold, OK?

OK.

I don't think I am depressed. There is no sense of hopelessness. No desire to die. I have no fear, no anxiety. I do not feel numb. I feel intense sadness, like I have lost something a while ago, and I need to find it again. Something has been taken from me. It needs to be regained. But what is it?

Maybe I will find my balance in the morning. I hope so.

The morning does come but the sadness remains, swaddled with young arms that seek to surround me with warmth and caring. I feel both, the closeness and the distance. The fleshy sweet warm contact and the cold isolation from all around me.

There is something else inside. It is a vague feeling, distant and yet precise, sharp edged. I know it is there, but it is far from close to

the surface. Far too submerged to have a name, I know, I am sure, it is coming. I will meet it. Just not yet.

It is the first school day, of this last week of school, and Jelou must get into gear to get to school on time.

As she leaves the bedroom, Jezryl and Jecim enter, both perching on the side of my bed as I go about getting ready for the day. They aren't saying a damned thing. They just sit there.

Jecim? What do you need?

You OK?

I don't know. Maybe. Yes, I'm OK. It's nothing for you to worry about?

Why that? If you not OK, we worry.

Why worry? Nothing bad will happen.

We not worry about that. We worry about you. We all worry.

Why?

You sad? You act sad, we think. Why that?

I don't know. But you have nothing to worry about. It is not about you.

Rolie, we know that! Really, we not worried for us. We worry for you. My baby want a happy father! And a big smile crosses her face.

I can't help but smile back. How can I not?

Good! That better.

The two hop off the bed, coming to me and giving me hugs and kisses.

I am told that they will make a special breakfast for me, and then they depart.

Each time something like that happens, I feel an ache. I feel the sadness. I feel something sharp pushing up.

How long will I feel like this?

It has been three weeks. School is out until June. Martia tried to reconnect with Jelou, but got nowhere. The gal even came to our gate more than a few days ago, but Jelou, flanked by Jecim and Jezryl, told her to never come back.

I don't think we will see her again.

As of yet, there has been no word, or resolution, regarding Marjune's interest in placing her granddaughter with us.

On the legal front, we have a little less than three more months before I can get the judgment of separation. I did ask Jomar to convey to Ping that all but this final matter has been successfully handled.

The sadness is still with me, but maybe I am getting used to it. It is like my shadow. It follows me and all I do, a salty-bitter aftertaste, even when savoring something sweet.

That pointy thing inside me has a name now. It is anger. Anger toward Charline and for what she took from me. Not the fiscal loss, much of which I have recovered but, rather, of my belief in the thrall of true love. I had truly believed in and luxuriated in it. It was like a drug, in which I was insensitive to the harsh realities of our motivations. It was sweet bliss and I swam in a river of it, thinking that my life was blessed.

In her leaving, she both denied me that drug and forced me, cold turkey, to see the world as it truly is.

Like the child who believes in Santa Claus, only to discover that old Saint Nick is an old fart who lives at the local nursing facility and is moving to a hospice center next week. My foolishness, in my later years, has exposed me as the old fool I am. Embarrassment and withdrawal at the same time. It is a hell of a combination.

I had buried much of it, deep within, to protect myself. I denied the damage it had done to me, and soldiered on, bleeding but ignoring the wound.

Now... now I can't ignore the wound. It is real. It is on display each time one of these five seek my acknowledgment, and confirmation, of a truth that is in fact nothing but the thrall.

I don't want to break their hearts. I wish them to live a life, believing it and never being damaged by being forced to see the truth of it all. That is part of the sadness. I can see the thrall, but I cannot join them in it. That is the other part.

And as I come to grips with that, I more and more feel the anger towards Charline. She is the reason that I will never feel that again. It was beyond great to feel it. And now, it is gone, forever.

There are things to feel good about. Jecim is in her fourth month. She is healthy. I have sent her to see a doctor just to make sure all is fine. It is. She prescribed some vitamins, but nothing else.

Myra is in her second month, we think. An EPT has given us a positive result. She will go to the doctor next month. And so, I will be a foolish old man with kids.

The moms will likely never be US citizens, but these kids will be. They will be dual citizens essentially right from birth. I will have to contact the embassy, file paperwork, as well as provide DNA swabs for the kids and me, but that will be enough to prove what existed from birth. They will have two passports.

I am carving at the moment. It seems to be my manner of creating totems. Totems to my reality, my world. The process of creation is spiritual. Maybe not healing, but a salve over the wound.

It rained last night, and the winds blew hard, but today the sky is blue, the scattered clouds are white, high and fluffy. There is still a strong breeze as the tall trees bear witness, but there is little of it at ground level. I have a fan blowing gently on me.

A tricycle pulls up at our gate but I cannot see who is getting out.

I hear an *Ay-Oooo!* of an unseen young voice.

Opening the gate makes it all clear. It is Myra's niece, Analiza, who is standing there, alone.

Good afternoon child. Are you here to see your aunt?

Yes, Po. And you.

Well, your aunt is working, but she will be back in an hour. Come in.

We walk back as far as the terrace. I point to a chair for her and seat myself after calling into the house for a glass of water for the kid. Analiza is sitting quietly. I have not a clue as to why she is here.

Vieve appears with the water, initially handing it towards me, before I direct her to the child. Once complete, I reach out to Vieve, pull her down a bit and whisper in her ear, *Find out why she is here.*

There begins a long conversation in Cebuano. It is taking long enough that Vieve eventually sits down on the bamboo bench as the conversation continues.

I have no clue what is happening and decide to return to the carving, as this talkfest continues.

It has definitely taken a while, but I gather they are done, as Analiza comes up to me and ‘honors’ me. I look at Vieve and ask the obvious question. *Why?*

Vieve motions for the kid to join her on the bench. Analiza does. Vieve’s arm is around the girl’s shoulders as I get the story.

She come here for the truth. She hear for a long time now many arguments. Almost every day between her mother and her grandmother. Sometimes they argue, what best for Analiza. Where Analiza to go. Grandmother scream that Mother is bad and child learn bad things. She yell, this fighting bad for the child. Better she go to live with Myra and you. ... Mother scream back, ‘Not that! No. They do sex with her there!’ Grandmother say, you, Rolie, not want Analiza there for that same reason, but what the better option? This no good! This bad for Analiza! Worse than sex, maybe. Mother say, Analiza not want that, so Rolie say No anyway. Why argue about it? It not happen. Analiza say this argument happen a number of times. It happen last night again. She afraid to ask grandmother or mother what they mean, so she come here.

OK, and what did you tell her?

The truth.

No, Vieve, what exactly did you tell her?

I tell her how we live here. I tell her that sex part of adult life. But not to be part of child's life. It wrong to make a child do sex. You believe this very much. That why you say she not to come here. She ask about Jelou. I tell her Jelou have a bad mother and she learn sex when she was very young. It change her and she want it now. She too young but no choice anyway. Analiza not that way and so no need to do sex yet. She ask, 'We fight here?' I say, no. We not fight. She ask, 'We scream here?' I say no. She ask, 'We happy here?' I say yes. We happy. She say she need to talk to Myra. She ask if I know what Myra think. I say, Myra think it wrong for you here. She and you agree. It wrong for her. She ask, 'Does Sir hate me?' I tell her you not hate her. You love her. That why you say this not a good place for her. That all Rolie.

That is a lot, and far more than, 'I tell her the truth!' Thank you. She still needs to see Myra, right?

Yes.

OK she can wait out here for her aunt. I do not want Jelou lobbying her to join us, so it is best she stay out here.

That produces a new protracted discussion in Cebuano. Evidently too much of my comment was provided to the kid and now she definitely wants to talk to Jelou. I relent and the kid is escorted inside with one codicil. Jelou is to be warned that there is to be no encouragement for the child to come here.

Three quarters of an hour later, Myra arrives, gives me a kiss, before her planned entry into the house. I stop her, tell her that Analiza is here and is waiting for her, but that before she sees her niece, she must get the scoop on the visit from Vieve. I get eyebrows and then she is gone.

The wood is still in my hands. It feels good. It is the one thing that carries with it no sadness and no anger. In its touch there is stillness, peace, and truth. It is the same truth today as it was yesterday and it will be the same truth in one hundred years.

There is nothing more satisfying than knowing that. It is the one thing in my life I can be completely sure of. If humanity can be unsettling, my time on the terrace is the cure.

I have a good hour before the sun sets. I put it to good use.

Supper is a board meeting of the ad hoc citizens' council to protect Analiza. I am not a member. I just happen to be taking my meal at the same time.

Myra is the council chair, with Vieve the advocate for the child. It is proposed and seconded by all that our house is not suitable for Analiza. Even Jelou appears to agree.

Next, the position is proposed that, either Alida and Analiza need to move out of Marjune's home together, or Alida needs to move out alone. But, in all cases, Alida and Marjune must be separated. However, Alida may not reside with us. The council discusses the matter for a few minutes before it is put to a vote and the measure passes unanimously.

Finally, the matter of how to convey the decision of the council is discussed, and the conclusion that all members will leave after dinner, with Analiza, and inform the two women of the edict.

Being a bit of a pain in the ass, I ask, *Why do you think they will listen to you?*

And here I learn the one thing I most assuredly did not want to hear. Jelou turns to me and, in the sweetest of voices, exclaims, *Rolie, it is simple. If they ever want to see Analiza again, they both must agree. If they do not do this, Analiza comes here, to my bed. And they not to visit, ever.*

And Analiza agrees to this?

Yes.

Myra, do you agree to this?

Yes.

The rest of you agree to this?

Well, shit, they do.

Decisions

Marjune sits on the terrace this overcast Sunday. It's been two months since the edict. I gather the gals gave them seven days to complete the changes that they required.

In all that time, I have not seen her. Myra told me that Alida left as demanded. She wanted Analiza to go with her, but Analiza decided to stay with her grandmother. Alida was furious, of course, but in the end, she left alone.

Marjune is here to thank me. However, I am the only one in the house who doesn't deserve thanks, a point I make to her emphatically, via Jecim's assistance. I had nothing to do with what occurred. She doesn't want to believe me. Jecim tells her that even though she agreed with the decision, she had little to do with it as well.

Jecim suggests, I call into the house for Jelou, and the girl appears soon enough.

Sweetie, Madam Marjune came here to thank me for what I did to fix the problem with Alida. I told her I had nothing to do with this. She doesn't believe me. Please tell her how the decision was made. You can do it in Cebuano.

I get eyebrows and then she launches into her exposition, of which I have nothing to learn as I don't speak the language.

Jecim remains on the terrace and is listening.

It takes a few minutes, but, once it is done, Marjune asks Jelou a question. Jecim tells me, *she asks, 'Child, when you say she should be with you, that because you want this?' ... Jelou says, 'No Ma'am. She come and talk to me. I know Rolie not want this and I think maybe it OK to happen. But me and Analiza talk. I decide Rolie right. It wrong for her. But I also know, you love her a lot. I learn that from her. If she come here, you not see her. So, I decide, that the way to make you agree! I explain that to her and she say, OK. If they not agree then they not love her enough. So she agree.'* ... *Marjune asks, 'You are fourteen, child?' ... 'Fifteen now, Ma'am.'* ... *It was your plan, not Myra's.'* ... *'Me and Vieve. I think it, but talk with Vieve. She is*

the one who explain to the others.’... ‘My Analiza is not as mature as you are, child. She never could have understood all that.’ ... ‘Yes Ma’am. Rolie tell me something about how I changed by my life. Analiza not. He say, childhood stolen from me. Not right, but it done. We not do this to Analiza.’

Marjune looks at the two of us for a moment, stands, smoothing her dress, and announces that she must go, thanking us for our time.

As she closes the gate behind her, Jelou turns to me and says, as if talking to herself, or maybe to Marjune, Alida and Analiza, *Done now.*

It’s a good day. I do feel the chapter regarding Alida is over. Now in a month we may have the judgment of separation. It cannot happen any too soon. Jecim is six months along and looks very much pregnant. There have been no more pregnancies, but I suspect that it is only a matter of time before there are two more.

Iren is over here almost every other day, fussing over her daughter. When she isn’t here, Jecim’s sisters are here.

Mother and siblings also make a big deal about me. It is cute and silly. Jomar comes by often at night now, to share brandy with me. And so, I deplete my good brandy bottles far more often these days. He will be the Godfather for our child. Myra is to be the Godmother.

Jomar and I will be related through the child. I don’t have many friends, but Jomar is one now, and for all the best of reasons. And now, there are many times other PNP officers arrive with him at night. I must say I have found it a bit disconcerting, but there have been no problems and I seem to have made friends with a number of them.

But today, there is a new development in that relationship. About an hour before Marjune came by, one of the officers we see on occasion stopped by with a request. He needed to speak with Vieve. But before he did, he sat down with me.

Sir Roland. I sorry to do this, but I must speak with Miss Vieve. We know she a good girl now. No problem with that, but we need her to help us. Maybe she the only one who can do this?

I don't like the sound of it, but all I ask is, *Why?*

Sir, the sister of Miss Vieve is dead now. She shot three times. Her mother shot once but alive. We find her holding a gun. She in the hospital but under arrest. There is a man dead too. We think maybe the mother shoot the man in self-defense but she not say anything to us. She afraid of us. I not know what happen. We know she not have a license for a gun. The gun is illegal. But maybe if she trying to protect herself or her daughter, we ignore that. If the mother of Miss Vieve will talk to her, maybe we can help her. We do this for Miss Vieve. We know her mother bad, but it affect your family. Your family our concern now.

Officer, will you allow me to explain this to her? You will be here, but maybe it will go better if it comes from me.

Yes, that will be good. Thank you, Sir.

It is I who should thank you, and I do. I thank you very much.

It is good Sir, that we are friends, I think.

I agree. Now let me get Vieve.

It doesn't take long to get her out on the terrace, but, when she sits down, she is clearly scared.

You can relax a bit. You are safe. The officer is here as your friend. Believe me when I tell you that, if it were not the case, he never would have come at all. He knows you are a good girl, and thinks he needs your help. It is up to you to decide if he really needs it. But first let me tell you what he knows. This is difficult news. Stop me at any time if it is too much for you to hear. ... Your sister has been killed. She was shot a number of times. Your mother was shot once and lives. A man was there and he was shot dead, maybe by your mother. He thinks maybe she shot the man in self-defense. They don't know. ... Your mother refuses to talk to the officer. Maybe she is afraid of someone else. He thinks that maybe your mother will tell you. He will help your mother if he can for only one reason. ... He respects you.

Vieve has teared up. She gets up from the chair were she was sitting, takes the three paces needed to approach the Officer, kneels and honors him and then kisses him on the cheek. She continues to cry, and comes to me, crawling onto my lap before speaking.

Sir, Officer, my mother a bad person. I not know what she do or why. I not know if she innocent or guilty. If guilty, you must do the right thing and not think of me. I will try to help, but she not talk to me for long time now. We not OK with each other. Still I try. Will my mother live?

I not know Miss Vieve. She hurt bad, but maybe yes.

She gets up to go and I ask her if she needs me to go with her. She says, no, she will be OK. She knows the Officer will keep her safe.

That was all before Marjune appeared here. She is gone now.

As I sit on the terrace, Vieve returns via a PNP vehicle. She comes right to me and sits on my lap, putting her arms around me, and resting her head on my shoulders.

I hear, *Thank you*. And then a kiss comes to my cheek, and another kiss to my neck, and another, *Thank you, Rolie, Thank you*.

You're welcome, but why are you thanking me.

Maybe I be dead too. Yes maybe it me who dead.

What happened?

Hard to explain. Mother, she stupid, full of drugs, Shabu. She try to steal. Need money for the Shabu. My sister help her do that. They caught and then the guns. She guilty of murder I think. But I think she will die, so no trial. I tell the doctor, let her die. Give her to God. No one pay her bill. So leave her be. What she live for? She die in jail. She too sick now. Doctor say she have TB. She close to die anyway.

There is nothing to say. She may well be right. If she hadn't found us, even if this wasn't her time, she sees the road that would have been in front of her. I just hold her. That's all I can do.

The next few days end up being simply sad. Her mother did die only a few hours after Vieve had met with her. I will never know, but I suspect the docs 'let it happen.'

Both mother and sister got paupers' internments. I was willing to help pay for better, but Vieve refused to allow me to assist. It was her call and I respect it. She told me after it was over that they were not a family for her, we are her only real family. I suspect that is about right.

Vieve has been a little clingy but, considering everything, it seems understandable. We are all being careful, but I am not sure Vieve needs that as much as she just needs to feel grounded here. And that she is getting from all of us.

She is in my bed each night, but there has been no sex. She just needs me to hold her and sleep. I am happy to provide that. Maybe I understand that better than some other men. Just the closeness, the tenderness, is enough for me as she slowly comes to a new sense of balance.

Two weeks into this 'very alone' mourning and loss, she just snaps out of it and decides it's time to tease everyone in the house. She is playing pranks and just being silly. We get the message, Vieve has regained the ranks of the truly alive.

In an odd coincidence, on the same day, I get a text from my attorney. We have a court date for the hearing on the separation. It's just one week away.

I am looking forward to it as I need closure for legal means. I will need to adjust my Visa to a 'retirement' visa from the one I have now. The retirement visa is more expensive, but it is not a major problem for me.

As far as my life functions, it will not have any impact at all. The confusion and sense of bewilderment I felt in the beginning is long gone. I have five gals here. I didn't need five, but that is neither here nor there. They are here and they are not leaving.

Added to the good news, I have learned that I can apply for PhilHealth myself, once I get the retirement visa. It is a new option and comes at just the right time!

Today is the day of the hearing. Vieve's mourning ended last week, the same day I got the notice to be here at the court.

At the moment, I am sitting in a very warm courtroom. Fans run but are simply inadequate to the task. The court's docket is a full one, as case after case is called, people rise from the benches in the back and come forward.

There are stacks upon stacks of papers and manila folders on the judge's desk. He appears to be a patient man, with a long-suffering bench of clerks assisting him. There are no computers, or microphones or any trappings of technology here.

We wait for four hours before my case is called. The judge asks my attorney some questions about the basis of the request, to which he is told the wife has confessed to infidelity.

Is she here?

No your honor. She is in America. We have this affidavit that has been received and authenticated by our Consulate in America.

This is in the record?

Yes, Your Honor.

At which point, the judge asks a clerk for the document, and, five minutes later, the judge is handed the thing, reads it to himself, and then reads it aloud for all the court to hear.

He asks his clerk if there is any challenge. The clerk informs him that there is none. He asks, has the defendant been served? The clerk says that the defendant has been served via her attorney who advised the court that they will not contest.

He then looks at me and asks, *Sir Roland, Why did you not go back home?*

This is my home now.

After you are so treated, you still like the Philippines?

Yes Sir.

You know you may never marry here?

Yes Sir. I understand.

If I grant this separation, you are still married. Do you understand?

Yes, and neither can she, Your Honor. And she cannot inherit from me.

And with that, the old bird smiles, Yes, I see you do understand very well. Very good. It will serve her right. Your petition is granted. Attorney, please come here. We will sign.

Twenty minutes later a very sweaty me is outside the courtroom. It is done.

The separation is now real. Nothing else needs to be done, but ... revenge is a dish, as they say, best served cold.

The gals did not come with me to the court. But, though I was unaware, they did ask the attorney to text them the result as soon as she could. And so, I arrive home to a celebration and a 'wedding cake' with only a groom on it.

Iren is here, as is Marjune, as are all of Jecim's sisters, and Jomar and his wife. This is my family now. It is that simple. Life in the Philippines is about family and these people are that.

Jecim is seven months along and looking very much the mother-to-be. She is all smiles. Myra is five months along, and, though not as big, there is no question that she is carrying.

The party ends and the clean-up begins about eight at night, but as those cleaning are also the partiers, the actual end time for the party is, in reality, less than clear to me.

Whatever the matter, all is cleaned and all the others are gone by nine-thirty. And at nine-thirty they all line up in front of me and ask, which one gets me tonight?

Can we all fit on my bed?

That produces, hoots, laughter, the decision to try and a scramble up the stairs.

They want to get right to it, but I really need a shower, and that slows down the proceedings by a few minutes.

I have been thinking about this moment for a while. I know nothing is really different for me, but I have come to a decision. I never want these gals to be hurt and lose the sense of love they truly feel. I may not really ever feel it again, but there are times that lying is a good thing. This is one of those times.

I am out of the shower, and, as I get on the bed, they are already grabbing me.

Stop for a bit. I need to say something to all of you now. Right now, before you get me going! That gets a few giggles. *I could not say this until I was separated. In my mind, it would have been the wrong thing to do. Now that I am separated, to not say it, is the wrong thing to do. I am not sure this makes any sense, as there are five of you here, but listen and please accept it for what it is. Each of you is my dearest love. I love each of you in a way that I cannot explain, other than to say, it is a pure and real love. A love that knows no limits. I do not and cannot put one of you over another. All I know is each of you has my complete love and no one else in the world ever will... other than the children you give me.*

There is silence and then from Jezryl, *Well it is about damned time!*

That is followed by a chorus of agreement, which is then followed by an assault upon my person.

There is a mouth on each of my nipples, a mouth sucking my nuts, a mouth over my dick, and a mouth on my lips.

I guess I ought to say I am on sensory overload but that isn't the case. There is so much going on, it is a bit confusing. Still, they do slowly get me going, primarily as each slows down her attack a bit and it is less overwhelming.

Jecim is the one on my lips and that is fine with me. She was the first here, if not the first in my bed. But, with all the stimulation, it

is hard to think about kissing. She gets that, and kisses my eyelids, my forehead, my cheeks, my chin, my nose.

Myra and Jelou have my nipples and they are sweetly torturing me.

The two masters of the craft have me in a way that makes it clear they know exactly what they are doing. It has been a long day and I wasn't exactly horny when they started. But, given what is happening, I am just about bouncing off the mattress. Jezryl has my nuts completely in her mouth and Vieve has me down her throat. Both are humming the same tune and vibrating all below in a way I would never have thought possible.

Oh damn! Oh, fuck. I can't hold on any longer! Damn, this is so not fair.

And then it is too late. I give them all I have as I wail. *Shit!*

It is clear, no one is getting pregnant from this evening's events. But no one is complaining.

In the minutes that follow, positions are changed and sleep comes.

Coup de grâce

I took a van to Tacloban late last night and spent a few hours in a hotel, but I needed to be up early. I could have driven, but didn't want to leave my car here for days. I fly out on Cebu Pacific flight 5J652 to Manila, which leaves at six fifteen in the morning and arrives just an hour twenty later.

I am booked at the Hyatt Regency Hotel for one night. This is a trip I am taking alone.

I will get there early enough that I can drop my small bag with the hotel's concierge, and walk the few minutes to the Embassy this morning. At least, that is the plan. I have all the paperwork with me that I think I need.

We land in Manila. Traffic here is the pits. I didn't have to wait for my bag; I only have a carry-on. I get into a taxi before eight but, with all the traffic, arrive at the hotel long after nine! I do drop the bag and get to the embassy at about ten. There are hundreds of Filipinos queuing, but I walk up to the first guard, display my passport and am allowed through.

Eventually, a uniformed man asks me why I am there.

I want to report a fraud upon the United States of America, and I have with me a signed and notarized confession of said fraud.

And yeh, that stops the guy in his tracks. I bet no one has ever said that to him before. He tells me to wait.

Twenty minutes later, another guy approaches me. He isn't in uniform and he asks me the same question. I give him the same answer.

May I see the confession?

I open the folder and I remove the confession with the red ribbon of the consulate. *You can read it, but the original must stay with me for now. Are we in agreement on that point?*

We are, and I hand it to him. We are standing in a large room. Dozens of others are milling around as he reads and I wait.

He doesn't ask any questions as he reads and takes his time with the document. Finally, he hands it back to me.

Do you understand that, if this is a fake, you can, and will, be prosecuted?

I do.

Is this a real confession as it purports to be?

It is.

Who else has seen it?

It was presented in court, in Naval, Biliran, pursuant to my filing for a legal separation from the woman.

Did you receive the separation?

I did.

Do you have a copy of that court order?

Yes, that is in the folder here as well, as is the original NSO marriage document and my wife's NSO birth certificate and a photocopy of her US passport.

Wait here.

And I wait another half an hour.

A guard approaches me, hands me a piece of paper.

Sir, please return here at two this afternoon. Present this letter when you return.

He then suggests I might want to go out for lunch in the meantime, and, in a simply helpful way, escorts me out of the building.

The paper is an appointment to meet with a specific person at a specific time. There is nothing more on the paper.

Back outside in the hot and sunny midday Manila heat, I am presented with the question of where to eat. There are a number of

restaurants across the street and, as it is not noon yet, none are busy.

I sit down at the Bistro Michelle on Roxas and order the puttanesca and a brewed coffee. I have a copy of today's Philippine Daily Inquirer. I try to relax, but going to the embassy is giving me the same feelings I have when I go to an attorney's office. Still, I have chosen to do this. And so, I have some time to kill.

And kill it I do, but no one tries to kick me out. I enjoy a long lunch with far too much coffee, as I get a double espresso after the brewed coffee.

I leave in plenty of time to get back to the embassy, for my appointment. At least I think I do, but, as it is, I get in just a minute before two.

I hand the paper to a guy in uniform, who then gives me a good once over, once again, before saying, *Follow me, Sir.*

We walk through hallway upon hallway before I am ushered into a small room that I can only think of as an interrogation room. It is not nice enough to be an interview room. I sit and wait for the better part of an hour before two individuals enter. They give me only their first names, they hand me no cards, or anything else, and do not tell me what their station is, before proceeding to ask questions and demanding to see the paperwork.

I make the same request to them that the documents must at this time stay with me.

I get a response I am not expecting. *You are in no position to make any demands, Mr. Anders. Hand it over.*

Actually, I am in such a position. I have not broken any law. I have come voluntarily to report a crime. You have not identified yourselves. At this point, I am quite within my rights to make the request I have made. I am not under arrest, and I can walk out of here any time I wish. Any suggestion otherwise, would constitute a mistake on your part. Now would you like to start over, or shall I leave?

The one who didn't threaten me, leans back in his chair, smiles and says, *OK, maybe we got off on the wrong foot. We will hand the paperwork back to you but I ask that we be permitted to make copies if we deem it useful.*

Agreed.

I lay out all I have on the table and they spend a while looking at all of it. One of them texts something, and waits. A few minutes later, the door opens and another guy wheels in a small copier. The guy plugs it in and proceeds to make copies of everything, while the first two start asking questions about how it all came about, her leaving and such.

They ask about the property and the house. I tell them about Ping's problems and my assistance from the local PNP. That gets some laughs.

They ask about what I will do for a visa, and I tell them my next stop, tomorrow, is the Philippine Retirement Authority.

The papers are handed back to me, and I am asked for my contact information.

I give it, and all but one guy leaves. It's the guy who pissed me off.

So, Mr. Anders, are you doing this because you are an upstanding patriot of the U. S. of A.?

No, Sir, I am doing this because vengeance is sweet.

You know, for the very first time today, I really believe you. OK, well let's see if we can really fuck her up.

And he holds out his hand to shake mine.

It is after four when I finally see the sun again. Traffic is a nightmare this time of day, but I am walking the nine minutes back to the hotel.

Tomorrow I file for the SRRV Visa at the PRA. I have filled out their form, I have the other documentation and the required medical paperwork with me.

Everything else is simply a matter of forms and rules. I can and will fill out the needed forms and follow the rules. The place is supposedly half an hour from the hotel by taxi. I am giving it an hour.

I was right, it takes the better part of an hour to get there, but I get there. And I get, what I need to do, done. Mid-day, I get a text from someone at the embassy saying that they have forwarded the material to the USCIS. It is now out of their hands here.

OK, I have done all I can do, and I have proof I have filed for the visa I need to live here without a wife. Now all I need to do is get back on the plane.

The gals know I was filing for the visa. I didn't tell them about the embassy. They are happy to know that I can live here forever without the immigrant visa. And so, all is good as I get out of the tricycle I got, once the van dropped me off in Naval.

I am home, my home, and all I had which connected me to Charline is now severed, other than a marriage license which will remain, more as handcuffs for her and without meaning for me.

Last year, I was fucking three sixteen-year-olds. But they are all seventeen now. All are a year older, as am I.

Jecim will give birth as a seventeen-year-old. That is a little bit dicey, but we will not fly to Manila with her child, yet to be born, until Jecim is eighteen or, more likely, nineteen. Still, I will bring Iren with me when we do go.

My best guess is that we will probably go at the same time I need to go with Myra. I am not looking forward to dealing with how we may be greeted at the embassy when I show up with two moms. But, it ain't illegal and so, why sweat it? Well, technically it is quasi-illegal, but, after age sixteen, the parents are the only ones who can complain. That's why I think I need Iren there.

But that trip isn't for a year or two from now. Now, it is just... live my life and ignore everything else. That's the plan.

The plan is working, but living my life means that I am at the lying in clinic where Jecim is giving birth. I am not the only one here. No, shit no, we are all here. And when I say all, I mean sisters, mother, Jomar, my gals and me. Nothing happens here alone. Nothing other than taking a shit, anyway.

We have been here for hours. I am not going to try to say that I can appreciate the pain of childbirth. I can't. All I know is the look in Jecim's face as she struggles with the contractions and the goofy fear that she will fail me somehow.

How can that be? Why isn't she cussing me out? Damn, it's hard to see her in such pain. I have never been so close to it, so involved in it before. But I am here with her, holding her hand, as she cries out. Iren has her other hand. Family. It's all about family.

And then... we have a little boy. He looks perfectly like a normal little boy. And he is perfectly my son. He will carry my last name. He may be illegitimate, but he will have my last name and my DNA. Welcome to the world, boy.

We name him Roland Jomar Florano Anders. I decide to call him RJ. Jecim agrees, and it's done. RJ is our first. And now, as the executor agreement that Jomar signed stated, Jecim is now the executor of the trust of the land. It's a long way from the little maid I hired to this.

When we leave the lay-in clinic, with the rest of the family, and RJ in our arms, I look at Jecim, long and hard, and I realize, I love her. No salt. No bitter. I love her.

In two months, Myra will deliver. She is heavy with her child now and has resigned from the drug store.

RJ is not a problem for us. He is never put down. There are always ready arms waiting for the kid. He has five mothers here and then there are his grandmother, aunts, and nieces all wanting to care for him. RJ is never given an excuse to cry.

Jecim is breastfeeding him. It is the first time I have ever tasted breast milk. I gotta say, it ain't bad.

The days are all sliding together for me, if not for Myra, whose last days seem to be dragging on far too slowly.

It has been a month since RJ came into our world. Myra is struggling in this last month of her pregnancy. She jokes that Jecim is better than she at this pregnancy thing.

The gals are giving her massages and covering her with lotion a number of times a day. I suspect that the prolonged delivery that Jecim experienced, has Myra a little freaked out.

I am on the terrace, along with Jecim and RJ, who is sucking at a tit, when I hear something from the street. As I get up from my chair, I hear, as clear as a bell, in pretty good English, which I have not heard in person for over a year, *You fucking bastard!*

I turn to Jecim and quietly ask her to get Jomar here immediately. I get eyebrows. At the gate stands Charline. She has looked better.

This is no longer your home and you are not welcome here.

You know what they do to me?

No, and I don't care.

They arrest me. They put handcuffs on me. They put me in jail. They take my US passport from me. And then they deport me! They say I not ever to come back to the USA. You do that! You fucking bastard!

I say nothing. There is nothing to say. She seems to take that as an invitation to go on ranting.

Now I married in the USA, but no good. Why you do this!? Why!?

Go away, Charline. Go away and never come back.

She is just standing there. Two PNP vehicles approach at a pretty good speed, and pull up at the house. I know the guys. They have been here many times. We have shared beers, rum and brandy. These guys and I have laughed together and enjoyed each other's company. They are friends.

One calls out to me, Roland, *this baragan*⁶⁵ causing you a problem?

Yes. She needs to leave and never come back. She used to live here. But she doesn't anymore. She is my wife, but we are separated and the court finds her the guilty party.

Yes, we know this. ... Ma'am, you need to leave here. It very dangerous for you to be here.

Why you take his side?

You are a very stupid woman, I think. So think of this. My superior is the godfather of his new son.

What!?!

It dangerous for you to come here. You understand now? Do not make trouble for this man. He is our friend. Go now.

He calls out to another officer. *Cuff her and take her in for refusing a direct legal directive of an officer. If she gives you any trouble, use your own best judgment on how you deal with her.*

I go! I go! Yeh, she finally gets the point and runs off. The guys laugh a bit, and come in for a glass of coke and some snacks. It also gives them some time to tease Jecim that she can only keep RJ until they get him onto the force, as they remind her it is a family tradition in her family.

Family. It's all about family.

I love my family.

⁶⁵ Witch [Cebuano] (in Tagalog: bruha)

Sideways

Images

Tanduay Light Rhum



Return to Text

Sideways

Minute Burger



Return to Text

Sideways

Tricycles



Return to Text

Sideways

Mercury Drug



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Sideways

Pork BBQ or BBQ Baboy



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Bus between Naval and Tacloban



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San Miguel Pilsen Beer



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Fundador Light



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Jeepney



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Fundador Exclusivo Brandy



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Videoke



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Bench



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Evap



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Rice Brooms



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Naval Cathedral



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Hopia



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