BRIGHT LIGHTS

SYNOPSIS:

Twenty-three year old Aly Mendoza is an immigrant’s child. Born to Filipino parents but raised in Singapore, Aly was brought up as foreign as can be as the family fully assimilated themselves into a more worldly way of life. With the untimely death of her father when she was eighteen, and the already minimal contact she has with her paternal grandparents, Aly soon settles into a life of familial silence, further separating herself from the family who reminds her too much of the father she lost way too early in her life.

But when Aly finds out about her grandfather’s critical hospitalization in America, she packs her bags and flies thousands of miles – at the insistence of her mother – to be by the bedside of the man she has not seen or spoken to in years. Confronted by the scene in the hospital, she is forced to once again come to terms with the death of her own father while at the same time deal with the imminent loss she will have to again face, silenced by the apologies that are always too late.

Bright Lights maps the intricate relationship of the three generations: Aly, her father, and her grandfather; and poses the question of where one can begin mending a distance that seems too vast to cross.

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His face was still, as if a mask of sheer whiteness had been sewn upon it, halting the ticks of a person asleep. It was a mask that scared her at its ability to aggravate the lines of age that whispered stories of years lived, that she could not yet bear to look at him beyond a few seconds; choosing instead to focus all senses on the array of beeping bright lights that kept watch over him and the mess of tubes snaking around his body. His chest, she noticed, once broad enough for her to cuddle against over breakfast as she sat on his lap one cold morning in San Francisco – with his arms wrapped around her in an embrace of cinnamon, hot chocolate and Pan De Sal crumbs – now lay thin and fragile, wasting away from every labored breath that escaped with drool.

Her sole consolation, after all, was that she had been too young. Too young to realize that being an ocean apart would soon erase his scent of cinnamon from her hair and the rough of his unshaven chin chafing against her cheek whenever he leaned in to kiss her on the few mornings she spent with him, years ago when she still wore denim overalls and Minnie Mouse T-shirts over frilly skirts. Much too young to understand that inevitably enough, she would learn to not bother to give him the time of day, reaching that age when she yearned to be away — in school or at a friend's party; or at the bar where she spent her weekends — despite knowing full well the possibility of another of his long-distance calls, with him on the other end of the line counting the rings and practicing hellos as he tried not to fall asleep.

She wanted to tell him that, to get him to understand the very reason for her absence, but she could not. Instead, all she had in mind that day as she got into the elevator to take her up to the fifth floor where he had been warded was whether the hospital had bothered to use air deodorizers, or if this scent of medicine and bleach was mandatory for all hospitals, a way to let

its patients and visitors know that they had come to the right place: to die, or to live, or whatever else brought them there.

She wasn't always like this. She used to love scents, the way they would stay in between the tangles of her hair, triggering memories of faces and conversations that age easily erased. Like the way the scent of pink bubblegum and aftershave had stayed in her hair hours after her father had once carefully maneuvered tiny scissors, pulled from a Swiss army pocket knife, through the tangle of bubblegum and hair – telling her off for sticking gum in her hair. Now, whenever she smelled bubblegum or walked past a man who used the same aftershave, she would find herself brought back to that time in the middle of the airport with their luggage by their feet, her six-year old self giggling in his grip.

It was nothing like the scent that greeted her that morning when she stepped out of a rented sedan and walked across the hospital's open parking lot, pulling her coat tight around her, a brown paper bag stuffed in the pocket. She kept her head down, preparing herself for the familiar scene that would greet her at the door: fellow visitors, coming in from the cold, pushing against her to get through the door first, the flowers cradled in their arms smelling as if they were picked from graveyards; patients in wheelchairs dragging IV drips behind them, trailing after nurses bearing the traces of the dead in their eye bags; and the doctors and their charts milling around the lobby.

She held her breath, hoping none would register, but everything still made its way up and into her skin, making it harder for her to remember what she had planned to say: that long speech born on the drive over with her mother on speaker phone, when she had forced herself to think about what she should say and how she should say it – anything that would have made this less awkward than it already was. Nothing ever seemed right in her head, everything sounded like

excuses; and she knew she couldn't just go there with a bundle of excuses, not with him bedridden that way. But really, what could she say to a man, who in their last conversation together, face-to-face, asked if she liked bubblegum as they stood on his rooftop garden?

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"You see this, Aly? This is a Begonia Grandis," he said, pointing to the drooping pink flowers tangled amidst heart-shaped leaves. "It's your Lola's favorite. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure, Lolo" she replied, rubbing her hands together for warmth. It had been an early morning in San Francisco, much too early for a six-year-old to be feigning interest in a bunch of plants after a fourteen hour flight across the Pacific Ocean, from Singapore to San Francisco. Aly had been given the tickets one night by her father when he tucked her in, placing the pink envelope that smelled faintly of cinnamon beside the teddy bear kept on the shelf above her bed. He told her to open it in the morning, but she had been too impatient and pulled herself free from her covers and reached up to snatch the envelope before her father stepped out of the room. Three tickets fell onto her lap, together with a note that said: *Your turn*.

"And this over here is where we grow our tomatoes," she watched him point to the right. "You like tomatoes?"

"Sometimes," she shrugged, not looking over to where he was pointing, choosing instead to focus on the building-lined horizon of her Lolo's neighborhood: rooftop gardens atop mid-sized pastel-painted apartment blocks, balancing themselves on rolling hills lined with parked cars, all hiding sleepily behind the fog wafting in from the ocean. Everything looked so cold and asleep.

"Tomatoes are good for you. Gives you great skin."

She nodded, squinting against the glare of sunlight bouncing off half-opened windows and the cars defrosting from the chilly night. All she wanted at that moment was to descend the stairs into the warmth of the kitchen overflowing with her Lola's breakfast spread of Pan De Sal, champorado, and hot chocolate. Aly imagined her Lola, with her hair still in a mess from the night's sleep, shuffling around the kitchen trying to get her parents to eat the homemade Pan De Sal she had baked the night before. Aly knew her father would refuse, telling his mother not to bother, that he had everything taken care of, producing from under his arm, a box of whole wheat cereal he had bought at the airport and packed alongside their passports and winter coats.

"Lolo, what are we doing here?" Aly asked, stepping away from the row of potted plants he was herding her towards.

"Now, this plant," he stooped down, getting on his knees and leveling himself with the plants lined against the margins of the rooftop, "this is a younger version of your Lola's favorite plant. See the flowers? So pretty, but still very young. Come here. Look at the color, pretty right?"

She remained where she was, watching him gaze at the translucent pink flowers of the young balsam plant, turning the petals every now and then towards the light, plucking away those that had withered overnight, crumpled dark into itself. His hands, covered in veins protruding from his pale skin like highways of blue and black scattered up and down his bony arms, looked harsh next to the petals.

"No, Lolo, don't do that," Aly finally said, walking towards him. "You're hurting the plant."

He laughed, "Do you think I'd do that to something your Lola loves?"

"I don't know."

“Come here,” he sat her on his lap. Taking hold of her right hand, he cupped it around the flower, her thumb brushing against the petals, and she felt, for the first time, how fragile something could be.

“It's so soft. I don't want to break it.”

“You won’t. Here,” he pointed to a dark patch at the edge of a petal near Aly’s thumb, “pluck that one out.”

“I don’t want to,” Aly pulled her hands away.

“Why not?”

“The plant will cry. It’ll be painful.”

“Aly, don’t worry, it’ll be good for the plant. It needs to be cleared of its bad parts so it can grow pretty. Or else it’ll be overrun with those dark patches and the plant won’t be pretty anymore. Don’t you like the pink flowers? They’re pretty right?”

“Yes, but Daddy said—”

He did not hear her. “You have to be gentle with it, so you won’t accidentally pluck out the good parts.

“…Daddy said – ”

“Just the dark parts, okay? Like this one.”

“But I don’t want to,” Aly was getting upset, her hand balled to a fist, refusing to grab hold of the dying petal.

“Why not?”

“I just don’t want to.”

“It's easy. Look.”

Aly watched her Lolo grab the petal, plucking it free from its place on the stem, and dropping it onto the ground below, a part of it getting lost in the soil.

“See? It’s easy. You try.”

Taking a petal in her hand, the darkest one she could find, Aly tugged on it and felt it tear in half.

“It’s not working.”

“Try again.”

“I don’t want to anymore.”

“Fine, let’s look at other plants then.”

Turning his attention to the plant to his left, Aly felt him shift his weight beneath her. She tried to stand.

“Am I heavy, Lolo?”

“No,” he said, still holding onto her, “why would you say that?”

“Just asking. Daddy says I’m getting too heavy to carry around. And Daddy said not to tire you out too much.”

“You know, before, I could carry you with one arm. It would have been much easier to bring you around the garden.”

“You should have invited me over earlier then.”

“But your daddy is always busy, isn't he? I don’t think he would have brought you over.”

Aly nodded, picturing her father strapped tight in airplanes, busy crossing continents to have brunch with men in suits, spending barely any time at home with Aly and her mother in their apartment in Singapore, promising instead that he would make it up to them, that he would one day bring them along in one of his business trips. He never did.

“I think it would have been fun to visit you here as a baby,” she said, turning to face her Lolo.

“But you might not remember any of it.”

“I could try.”

“But you’d still be a baby. You wouldn’t know,” he said, pushing himself upwards, keeping her wrapped in his arms as he stood, carrying her over to the stairway leading down towards the kitchen.

Aly knew this much: her grandparents — her Lolo and Lola — who had lived in the Philippines all their lives, splitting their time between Manila and Pangasinan where they ran a string of carinderias, serving longsilog, tocilog and tapsilog alongside screaming street vendors hawking isaw and taho, had moved to San Francisco a few years after their son – Aly's father – left the Philippines for Singapore to accept a job offer to work for an American manufacturing firm, overseeing their business around Europe and Asia. It was there where Aly’s parents met, in a train station during his first week in Singapore.

Aly’s father had been staring at the colorful map of the train lines for too long, comparing the names of each station to another map he held in his hand, unsure which line headed back to the apartment he had just moved into a few days ago, when a woman standing a few feet away from him leaned in to ask if he was lost. She had a different accent, unlike the one he had trouble understanding upon landing at the airport. She pointed him to the line he should take, circling the stop on his map with a pen pulled from her handbag before asking if he was a tourist. He told her no, and she invited him for a drink the following night where she sat across from him fascinated that he had just moved from the Philippines, his English still thick with the Filipino tongue.

Before the night ended, with her sending him off to board the correct train line, she told him that she too is a Filipino, but only by birth.

“You know what, Lolo?” Aly said, turning her head towards him, playing with the tangled patch at the top of her head, “That flower is the same color as my bubblegum. Daddy bought it for me at the airport. You want one? It tastes like strawberry. It's downstairs, in my room.”

“So you like bubblegum?”

“I think so. I don't have it much. They don't sell it in Singapore, you know. Daddy said he has tried it before and that it is fun to chew. He said he used to chew it every day when he was younger. They just don’t have it in Singapore. I don’t think they allow it there. So I have to chew them all before we leave. Do you want one?”

“Maybe after breakfast,” he smiled, holding her tighter as they neared the stairs, “if you want, I can buy you some more.”

“It’s okay. Daddy said he will buy more for me.”

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It was hard for Aly to look at him now, frozen on a metal framed bed in a room stripped of color, his breath audible enough to be counted, so she looked away. She sometimes wondered how her grandparents had handled such a move at their age, imagining it to be hard, having to move away from the only life they had ever known and relocate to a country where their English was insufficient to land any of them a decent paying job. So they were forced to take night classes, while keeping any menial day-jobs they could find, jobs that paid them enough to get by, enough so their relatives back home would not mock their hasty decision and badger them to

return to the Philippines. Aly knew it must have been harder for her Lolo, a war veteran with a relatively successful food business back in the Philippines to have to start over from scratch, watching the woman he married years before struggle to wash the laundry and clean the houses of women half her age – all for a fresh start away from their house and relatives in the Philippines that did nothing but remind them of their only son who had stopped calling.

It would have been easier to give up, to pack their sweaters and scarves and return to the sweltering heat of the Philippines; but they didn't, working hard instead for the next few years, brushing up on their English and saving enough money to open a small restaurant just a few blocks down from their apartment, serving the same Filipino fare they had served back home.

Aly hadn't known when she was younger that her father had hardly helped his own parents, forgetting to call during the times when he said he would and sending them money only when he remembered. Her father had been busy, after all, traveling for months on end to places where he soon picked up an accent, erasing everything that connected him back to his hometown of dusty garbage-lined streets where people smiled even as their houses washed away at the height of typhoons.

At the end of every trip, he would return home for a few weeks or so, with a notepad filled with the food he had eaten that he now wanted his wife to try and cook, telling her to take the pot of adobo off the stove and to place the cookbook his mother had sent over back on the shelf – the book filled with the recipes of childhood meals he had once enjoyed. His wife never refused, but in exchange would try to get him to call his parents, to tell them that he was home safe. He always promised he would; but he never did, too immersed in the stories he would tell over dinner of bouillabaisse or lamb chops slathered in mint sauce.

It was too late now; and as Aly stood there, listening to her Lolo breathe through tubes that intensified the rasp vibrating from inside his throat, she could not help but remember how her father had once whispered to her in a voice strained from tubes that had been pushed in and out of his throat for months as he lay in the same position she now saw her Lolo lying in. Her father had told her to promise him just one thing, and that if she loved him, she would say yes. She said yes, and he fell asleep, surrounded by the same beeping bright lights that now accompanies Aly in her dreams, lulled by melodies that always seemed familiar – like she had heard them somewhere before, but couldn't place.

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"Lolo, why do you live so far away?" Aly once asked, playing with the ruffles of her pink dress as they sat on the sofa in a living room of an apartment hidden among rows of Singapore's identical apartment buildings. She had just turned four, and it was the first time her Lolo had ever held her. He was bouncing her on his knees, singing a song Aly could not understand. "Mommy said you had to take an airplane. Daddy takes airplanes and he always goes somewhere far for a long time."

"It's not that far, just across the ocean," he handed her the teddy bear whose face he had been sitting on.

"What is ocean?"

"The sea. It's like a swimming pool, but bigger. A lot bigger."

"So why didn't you just swim?"

He laughed, rubbing his unshaven chin on her cheek. “It's much too big for me to swim in. It’s very big. It would take me years to swim across it. I’m not a very good swimmer, you know? But if I fly, it takes only a day.”

Aly tried to wrap her mind around a picture of an ocean as a big swimming pool. In her head, the ocean was as small as the patches of blue on the globe atop her father’s desk in her parent’s bedroom where she would make her fingers walk, spinning the globe with every stride, crossing the spaces between countries with just a few steps.

“A day, just to fly? That is tiring.”

“It was. But it’s okay ‘cause I really wanted to meet you.”

It had been her grandparents’ second day in Singapore, their first and only visit to South-east Asia since moving to America a few years before Aly was born. They had managed to make it in time to help pick out the Christmas ham and wine despite the long queues at San Francisco International Airport where they begged the lady at the ticket counter to change their flight from the 27th to the 20th. *We made a mistake,* they told the lady, pulling a baby picture of Aly from their luggage and waving it at the lady’s face, insisting that the lady look at the picture of the granddaughter they had yet to meet.

Aly had hidden behind her mother when they first arrived, pushing her face deep into the back of her mother's thighs when her father came home from the airport, his parents lagging a few steps behind him. Aly was pushed to say hello, to bow and grab her grandparents’ hands and press it against her forehead; but she remained where she was, staring at them, a teddy bear hanging by her side. It was only much later, when she watched them unpack from the doorway of the guest-room, did she finally said hello, though only to get the candy at the end of her Lolo's outstretched arm.

“Has anyone told you that you look like my son,” her Lolo smiled, holding her face in his hands.

“You mean my Daddy? But I'm not a boy.”

“No, no...Of course you're not a boy. You just have your Daddy's eyes. Just like mine, you see?” He placed his face against hers, leveling their eyes next to each other.

“I can't see.”

“It's okay.”

“But I want to see! You wait here.” She pushed off his lap, the teddy bear falling to the floor, and ran into her parents’ room to grab the hand mirror by their bedside table — the one that lay against her parents’ wedding picture.

Aly’s father had chosen to forgo the usual Catholic wedding ritual he knew his parents had been yearning for, with him being their only child: the bride in a long white dress walking down an aisle of a church in Antipolo towards their son donned in a traditional barong, a priest facilitating a scripted exchange of vows between the couple, the binding of the couple over prayer recited by the priest as those in attendance break into hymn, the throwing of rice as the newlyweds walk back down the aisle and into a waiting car with ‘Just Married’ etched on the back windshield...they wanted it all; but instead, Aly’s parents held a simple ceremony in Singapore’s Registry of Marriage, inviting just a handful of guests to witness an event that took a mere fifteen minutes, with her mother dressed in a pale blue pantsuit and her father in the basic coat and tie. The couple of pictures they had from that day, which they kept displayed on their bedside table, were of them by the desk of the judge, signing the documents that would bind them legally as husband-and-wife. They looked like they were signing documents to purchase a house, or a new cable subscription.

Aly knew her mother had been disappointed, telling Aly once when she had asked about the picture. Losing her parents to a car crash when she was just nine, Aly's mother was sent to live with her godmother, a Singaporean woman whom her parents had become close to a few years before their death. Since then, she had yearned to find out more about the country of her birth, a place she could never remember, having left the Philippines when she was just two years old and relocating to Singapore where she learned to speak Chinese and eat dishes that made her lips swell from the spice – and where her parents eventually died. She had looked forward to returning to the Philippines to get married, excited to finally meet the parents of the man who she met a couple of years ago in a train station; but he had been too immersed in his work, drawn to the lure of travel that his job entailed. So the wedding took a backseat, with him too busy to plan a full-blown church wedding, too busy to remember to purchase tickets for his own parents to attend the wedding registry, and too busy to call his parents to say thank you for the gift they had sent over a few weeks after the papers were signed: a package with a note congratulating them on their union, attached to the handle of a silver antique hand mirror engraved with letters and numbers.

"Here," Aly said, running over and handing the mirror to her Lolo, "show me."

Aly watched her Lolo turn the mirror a few times over his hands, running his fingers over the carvings engraved along its side, noting the scratches that marred its once polished finish, before pulling her back up onto his lap. "See, our eyes are the same," he said, tracing their reflection with his finger.

"No, I don't see. I don't have these," she pointed to the wrinkles lining his eyes.

"Of course you don't, you're still young. But look," he pointed to her irises, "just like your father's – and just like mine."

Aly peered closer. She had her father's eyes, almond-shaped and dark.

"I guess it looks the same. I just don't have those," she pointed again at the wrinkles, "Daddy doesn't have those either. You're different."

"Well, because your daddy is still young."

"So, you are old? My teacher said if you are not young, you are old. Like an old man. Are you an old man?"

"I am. That is why I have come to see you."

"Because you are old?"

"No, because I wanted to meet you."

"You could have come earlier."

"I could have, but I had to save money. It's very expensive flying over here."

"Expensive?"

"Money. I need a lot of money for the plane ticket."

"Daddy gets his ticket from the fax machine in his office. He travels a lot. There's always a ticket there."

"Does he take you along with him?"

"No," Aly looked down, "but he promised. Maybe one day when he has time. Then maybe I can fly to you."

"Or I can keep flying to you."

"And bring me candy again? I like candy. And teddy bears."

"Do you know that I sent this to you?" he said, picking her teddy bear off the floor and placing it in on her lap. "I sent it all the way from America when you were much younger so you would have something to hug at night."

“But I hug my mommy at night.”

“How about teddy here? Do you hug him at night too?”

“No. Daddy places him on the shelf above my bed,” she said, raising her arms over her head, “very high up. I cannot reach.”

He laughed, pushing her little arms down. “Maybe you can hug him to sleep next time, so you can remember me?”

“Okay, I’ll try.”

“Promise?” he smiled, offering his pinky finger to the little girl.

“Promise,” she said, wrapping her little pinky with his.

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She sometimes still thinks about that promise, wondering if he ever held it against her, or if he silently hated her for not keeping her word all these years. She couldn’t ask him now, not with him lying so still, burdened by the tubes running all over his body, some wrapped around his torso, others poking out of his arms and chest and linked to various bags of liquid. Besides, that promise was made years ago, back when she could barely construct proper sentences together, it doesn’t count — unlike the other one. It was an easy choice.

Who was he to her, anyway, but the man who sent gifts every year without fail for her birthday, with a note attached wishing her well and if she would please give him a call. Like that time, five years ago when she came home to a box on her bed wrapped in a Minnie Mouse-adorned bow with a card that read: *Happy 18th*. She had pushed it aside, the box falling off the

edge of her bed and skidding under a desk. She did not need to open it to know that she wouldn't like the gift, probably another dress — much too frilly and four sizes too small.

Aly had learned, early on, to perfect her smile whenever her mother would ask about the gifts she received – her mother not knowing about the pile of unopened gifts, with the same Minnie Mouse-adorned bow, that Aly kept in her cupboard under piles of clothes that she had been quickly outgrowing – and formulate excuses whenever the phone would ring an hour into her birthday dinner filled with dishes of her mother's attempt at Filipino cooking, recipes taken from the cookbook Aly's Lola had sent over. It just became easier to ignore them, to run away and make excuses, rather than to submit herself to minutes of her Lolo asking her to repeat the last few sentences she had just said because he had sneezed, or coughed, and missed everything.

But that year, on her eighteenth birthday, her mother had not asked about the gift delivered to the house, and had let the phone ring during dinner.

Her mother had gone all out that year for Aly's birthday dinner, filling the table with a spread that took days to prepare — kare-kare, sinigang, dinuguaan, crispy pata, adobo, sisig — dishes in the cookbook, marked to be the childhood favorites of Aly's father. Aly had never learned to appreciate some of those dishes growing up, avoiding the ones which sounded revolting – like the dish made of pig's blood. But that day, Aly piled her plate high, remembering how her father had once pointed out that he had been eating such dishes since he was born, before asking his wife to please get the jar of sambal chili from the kitchen — a jar that now stood in the middle of the table, untouched.

It had been quick, a stroke, the doctors had said, mid-flight on his way back from France, first paralyzing the bottom half of his body, hospitalizing him for a few months. It was during an afternoon stroll around the hospital's corridors when he made Aly and his wife promise that they

would not call his parents no matter what might happen. He did not want them to worry. They were too old to worry. Besides, he would recover and everything would soon be back to the way it was, he was sure of it. But there was another stroke, a month before Aly was to turn eighteen, pulling him into a coma he would not wake up from.

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"Hello Aly! It's almost your birthday! How are you? How old are you going to be?"

The phone had rung a few days after her father passed, and Aly had answered. For a moment, she thought it had been her father on the line, but it was just her Lolo.

"You're a lady now, right? Eighteen? Are your parents throwing you a debut? They should! Tell my son he should. Choose a nice theme, with a nice dress, okay?"

Aly had not known what to say, not quite understanding what he had been saying. It had been easier in the past, with her Lolo practicing his English on her; but he seemed to no longer care as the years passed, constantly choosing to speak in Tagalog whenever possible, urging Aly to reply the same way.

"Um, hello, Lolo."

"Aly! You sound so different now. How are you? Are you good?"

Aly nodded her head, knowing he wouldn't be able to see.

"Are you excited for your birthday?" he continued, still speaking to her in Tagalog. "Tell your mom to cook sinigang. My son loves sinigang. Tell her you would like it too."

"Opo," Aly responded with the stock words she knew, the *po* and *opo* – words of respect – that she picked up from her mother who had been, for the past few years, trying to learn Tagalog,

reading phrases off a book and asking Aly to repeat after her. Aly never bothered to render most into memory, with the syllables of the words much too complicated for her to keep track of.

“Good, good. Are you in school now?”

“Opo.”

“What course are you taking? Are you having fun?”

“Opo.”

“You should study hard, so you can be successful, like your father.”

“Opo.”

“Does he still travel a lot?”

“Opo.”

“Good, good. He’s been busy.”

“Opo.”

“How about you? Is school busy?”

“Opo”

“I miss you. Do you miss me? Your Lola misses you also. Do you miss us?”

“Opo.”

“Good, good. You should visit soon okay, and call more often. Tell your father to call us, okay?”

“Opo.”

“And tell your mother to keep cooking you Filipino food. Filipino food is yummy, right? It is our favorite. We cook it here all the time, especially sinigang. Very yummy.”

“Opo.”

And the line was cut, her grandparent's international call credits running out, leaving Aly to pretend to have understood every word, to numbly tell her mother that her Lolo and Lola do not like sinigang, that she should not make it anymore, and that she would rather not speak to them again. It was too hard.

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Despite the years that passed between them, Aly still felt like that little girl sitting on her Lolo's lap in the garden, looking at him face on, wanting to count the lines on his face just to see how many more had developed since they last met; and yet wanting to also turn away, hop off his knee and run into her mother's arms to lay her head on the familiar curve of her mother's shoulder.

This had been her mother's idea, pushing Aly to reply to a postcard her Lola had mailed over, bearing a picture of a harbor overlooking the bay — a place her Lolo had taken her when she had last visited, feeding her pretzels and pink cotton candy and pointing out the sea lions which lay sleeping on floating wooden boards. There were only two lines of text on the back of the card, written in her Lola's familiar scrawl, identical to the marginal notes scribbled on almost every page of the cookbook she had once sent over. The first spoke of his illness, and the second was an urge to her family to fly over for a visit, *one last visit*.

The last time Aly had flown across the Pacific Ocean, her father had been sitting next to her on the long flight, drawing shapes in the clouds with his fingers — dogs, cats and bunnies in baskets, anything she wanted — before wrapping her in a blanket when they were somewhere over the middle of the ocean and the lights were turned down and the cabin got quiet. Her flight

now was nothing like that. Just her and her iPod next to the window, struggling to find shapes in the clouds, a paper bag cradled on her lap.

She had contemplated on leaving the paper bag with her Lola, extending her apologies and boarding a flight straight back to Singapore; but when she got there, her Lola had gone home for a shower and a nap, leaving Aly to stand by the nurse's station wondering what to do with herself. She didn't want to be there any longer than she had to, with the nurses and doctors brushing past her, pushing gurneys and trays of pills that kept bringing her back to the one thing she had been learning to forget back home: the day when she had rushed into a room and refused to let go of the man still on the bed, the machines around him plunged into a solid beep.

This time, though, there had been no rushing anywhere; just her inching slowly into the room a nurse had guided her into, avoiding where her Lolo lay. Aly had placed the paper bag on a table by the window, next to a vase of flowers her Lola had probably left days before, the pink translucent petals that drooped slightly in the shadows, burdened by discolored petals curling into themselves.

If he had been awake, Aly knew that he would have told her to trim the flowers, to cut its stem at an angle and to pluck away the dead petals. But he hadn't stirred once since she arrived, so she sat herself on a couch by the table, where she had been for a while unconsciously wiping the edges of an engraved silver mirror with the sleeve of her sweater, removing years of grime that had settled in between the carvings from having been left abandoned beside a picture of her parent's wedding day. She found her parents' initials and their wedding date carved next to those of her grandparents, alongside a string of other letters and numbers she could not place.

“Hello, what do you have there?”

A nurse entered the room, the same woman who had led her into the room earlier.

“Nothing,” Aly replied, placing the mirror back into the paper bag. “How is he?”

“As good as he ever will be. He's been in and out mostly. Been that way for months.” The nurse reached up to one of the IV-drips hanging on a steel stand and tapped it with the side of her pen.

“So that tube down this throat, it’ll always be there?” Aly pointed to the respirator taped to her Lolo’s mouth, knowing how uncomfortable it must be.

“The doctors sometimes take it out, depends if he's having a good day. He had that out a few days ago. We’ll see later tonight if he improves, maybe he can get by with an oxygen mask. He’d like that, right?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“He will. He doesn't get many visitors, you know, just his wife. So it's good you're here. I’m sure he’d want to talk to you. You're family, right?”

“How'd you know?”

“You look like him. You have his eyes.”

Aly looked down.

“Don't worry, I've worked here long enough to see families come and go. I usually can tell who's who,” the nurse said, checking on the surgical tapes that held the tubes around him in place. “You know, you can talk to him if you want to. He can hear you. It'll be good for him.”

Aly forced a smile, knowing it would have been easier if she was younger, when words flowed unhindered from her lips, story to story, giggle to giggle, fascinating him with a life he had always wanted to be a part of. But that was years ago — impossible now — because she had grown too accustomed to this silence, too unprepared to hear the voice that she knew would bring back the bubblegum in her hair.

“I don't know where to start.”