

Short Story – 3<sup>rd</sup> prize (2010)  
CPMA Research Facility copy

Café Masala

Synopsis:

Nina and Andy are at the fag end of the honeymoon phase of their marriage—though only Nina seems to know it. Living in India, where he works for a top hotel chain, her days are measured in spa visits, kitty lunches and dates with her husband whenever he's in town, while his are measured in deals sealed, dollars earned and guests served with a smile. But she could only take so many dinner parties surrounded by society ladies in two-*lakh* saris and glittering jewels. What's more, Andy wants to start a family but Nina can't help thinking of motherhood as a speed bump, not just a bump on the belly. Something's got to give.

But Nina is not one to throw in the towel. If only she could find a project to keep her busy and help her prove her worth, she thought, things would be A-okay. Dust off forgotten dream: a bookshop-cum-café in Manila that serves up literature as well as lattés, books as well as brews. Andy is supportive, but Nina is stuck. She couldn't even think of a proper name for the dang place and a name was what she needed to make it feel more tangible, more real. Shaken by an outburst from his increasingly restless wife, Andy suggests that she take a trip to Manila to reconnoiter for the business.

She is all too happy to accept the offer, not knowing what's in store for her: shoe-shopping disaster, aging parents and a fallen hero. What begins as a time-out and business trip becomes a soul-searching journey as the project hits a dead end and she finds herself taking a detour to a completely different, but possibly happier destination.

*What a bummer to be born with big feet in Manila*, Nina thought glumly, curling her toes and willing her sizeable feet to shrink as the ghost of her pedal impediment returned to haunt her. As a kid, she had seen Shelley Duval's version of Cinderella on TV, in which the evil stepsisters crammed their bunioned feet into some kind of contraption, trying to make them smaller so they could fit the dainty glass shoe that Cinderella, clever girl that she was, had left behind as a clue for the handsome prince to find her. Her brother had called it "stupid baby stuff," asking why the shoes hadn't changed back into homely slippers when the heroine's clothes returned to rags at the strike of midnight. Nina had to admit he had a point and even felt sorry for him when he was rewarded for his pains with a smack by their mother for using the s-word. Still, the scene from the fairy tale would replay itself in her mind every time she had to buy shoes. As it were, she rarely succeeded in finding something decent-enough looking in her size and had to go all the way to Marikina with her mom to order something *pasadya*, back when bespoke wasn't the cool thing it is now. Oh how she wished for that miraculous contraption every time she looked at her ungainly Gregg moccasins alongside her seatmate's beribboned babydolls.

Her obsession with the Cinderella contraption lasted until sixth grade, when it was supplanted by the foot-binding stuff mentioned in passing by their teacher while they were learning about Chinese civilization. She regretted this years later, seeing the custom for the feudal, misogynistic thing that it was. She was unable to suppress a shudder when a Filipino-Chinese classmate in college, giving a presentation on her family history, had mentioned that her great-grandmother had 'lotus feet' and passed around a pair of embroidered silk footwear, frayed and faded, resembling a pair of oversize, pointy baby booties. Nina could countenance the idea that women

in the ancient Middle Kingdom might want to deform themselves for beauty, but it had never occurred to her that the first-generation immigrants who came to the archipelago from Fujian could have brought the twisted practice with them in their little boats.

Ah, little boats! She shook her head to dispel the offensive image that made a mockery of her Gulliveresque dilemma. Below her, on the cream rug that covered the floor of the shoe and bag store, were marooned the two small canoes that doubled as her footwear.

“Ma’am, we don’t have a size 10 in this style either. Would you like me to check with our Greenbelt branch?” The salesgirl’s voice couldn’t be sweeter. She’d had the phone cradled against her ear for the last half hour, vainly and valiantly attempting to find something Nina’s size in one style or another at this or that branch of the upscale boutique.

“Could you, please? It’s really a pain being a bigfoot,” she smiled apologetically, consoling herself that the humiliating ordeal would soon be behind her. She actually thought that she had laid that ghost to rest, never having met such difficulty finding big sizes in Khan Market or South Extension in New Delhi where she had been living with her husband for the last four years. Well, she should be fine for at least the next two years until Andy’s contract expires. After that, he hoped to be picked as GM of the resort that the hotel chain he worked for planned to put up in an island off Cebu. Do the Cebuanos have bigger feet than Manileños, she suddenly wondered.

Yes, she would have her pick of ship-size shoes, as her brother described her footwear, back in India. It must be all that milk they consumed, she thought, imagining Parvati, her helper, going to the Mother Dairy booth each morning and returning with a small metal bucket sloshing full of creamy milk. Nina was convinced it tasted better that way than taken from a Tetra Pak, ultra-heat-treated and homogenized, a term she distrusted for its vaguely Orwellian ring. But Andy would have none of the “co-op” milk, as he called it. “Have you seen the trucks they use to

transport that milk and the fire hose they use to refill the dispensers?” he asked, his nose wrinkling in distaste. “Doesn’t look too hygienic if you ask me.”

Clean or not, the Indians drank the milk like fish did water and used it liberally in their sweets and after-dinner puddings, which she suspected must be why so many of them grew so large, vertically and otherwise, feet included.

“Good news, ma’am! They’ve got a pair left in Powerplant. Shall I ask them to hold it for you?” You would have thought the girl was telling Nina that she had struck the lotto jackpot.

“Thank goodness!” she cried. “I was just about to give up hope. Yes, ask them to keep it aside, please.”

Her thoughts wandered back to the milk booth as the girl dictated her details over the phone to the Powerplant branch. Yes, it had to be the milk. Take Sushmita Sen. Hadn’t she been skinny—practically anorexic—when she won her Ms. Universe crown in Manila in 1994 with that unforgettable answer to the question “What is the essence of a woman?” Trust a Bengali to come up with such a poetic answer, worthy of their beloved Tagore. But Nina doubted that many Filipinos would recognize Ms. Sen now in her decidedly heavier avatar, for which, she was sure, generous helpings of the milky *sandesh* and *rasgullas* that Bengalis so loved were responsible in no small measure. And the irony of it! The woman who had won her crown by saying, “The essence of a woman is that hers is the origin of a child” had two adopted kids, but no progeny of her own.

But that was a topic she herself would rather steer clear of. Hadn’t she managed to convince Andy to let the matter rest for a few years? Now, in the rare instance it was brought up between them, Nina simply referred to it as *that thing we’re not supposed to discuss right now*.

Not that she disliked children. Far from it. She would actually get a pang every time she saw a baby, and start thinking “Maybe it’s time Andy and I—” But that was as far as she would get before the image of a highway exit toll gate loomed up in her mind, reminding her that motherhood meant giving up the right to take the fast lane, a speed bump more than just a bump on the belly. Which wasn’t to say that she wanted to live on the fast lane—she just wanted to know she had the choice if the whim took her.

Nina pushed the thought out of her mind. Let sleeping dogs lie, she chided herself. As she rose to her feet, she reminded herself to inquire discreetly about Ms. Sen’s milk consumption from Andy’s Bollywood connections when she got back to India. That dog, at least, wouldn’t bite even if stirred awake.

2

Nina chose a window-side table at the café and plopped down on a chair. Having ordered an iced coffee, she undid the shopping bag and, folding back the crisp wrapping tissue, gently lifted out a pink abaca clutch. There was no way she could have left the store without a purchase after having put the salesgirl through all that. Lighter purse, lighter conscience, she thought. Fair enough. Besides, it was just the thing for one of those dinners Andy had to host or attend every so often in his job. The utter simplicity of the clutch would be a perfect foil to the be-sequined and bejeweled arm candies of the society ladies who came to those affairs. Her own style had become progressively simpler the more she mingled with these Indian women, with their penchant for heavily embellished saris and glittering jewels.

“That sari she’s wearing costs at least two *lakh*,” a friend had whispered to her of a lady who passed by during one these late-night soirees. She did some quick mental math and was

scandalized to realize that that single length of cloth, at 200,000 rupees, was two years' worth of Parvati's income.

She herself usually showed up at these parties in a simple black or white evening dress, a single strand of pearls on her neck, looking every bit like a common crane amidst a flock of flamingoes. This had the unexpected effect of drawing looks her way, as if people's eyes, tired of all the lavish detail, found welcome rest in something simple, austere even.

Nina was still imagining her grand minimalist entrance at the following week's Diwali bash, wearing a plain silver-grey dress with the pink clutch, when a tap on the shop-front glass broke her reverie. A woman stood on the other side, beaming at her expectantly.

*"Uy, Nina! It's me!"*

It took her a while to place the vaguely familiar face. "Ms. Dela Rosa? Miss!" she cried incredulously. "Oh my gosh!" She hurriedly stashed the clutch in her shopping bag, ashamed to have been caught by her favorite teacher from high school entranced by something so mundane. She made for the door and greeted her former mentor with a hug.

"My, look how you've changed! That's a spiffy new hairstyle you got there. Quite a makeover, huh! What's up, Nina?" She winked at her teasingly.

Nina laughed. She and her classmates had adored Ms. Dela Rosa because she talked just like one of them outside the classroom. "I guess it helped that I stopped being a nerd? Or became less of one, at least... But I hardly recognized you either, Miss! St. Scho's faculty has such smart uniforms now? I remember those drab numbers they used to make you wear."

Her former teacher had on a sleeveless white cotton blouse with gray slacks and black patent sling-backs. It was a far cry from the schoolmarmy skirt-and-blouse ensembles Nina

remembered her and the other teachers wearing, made more hideous by their color—usually pink or yellow, cheap cloth and poor tailoring.

“Oh, I stopped teaching there five years ago, but I’m sure they’re still wearing the same old thing,” the woman shook her head, grinning. “I thought you knew all along. I’d gotten married, had a baby, and told myself I’d take a break for a year to look after him. A year became two, then three, and when I was finally ready to go back, what do you know? They’d changed the recruitment policy and only those who’d passed the LET could apply! Bummer, right? It was the same with the other schools and it just felt like too much effort to review for the test. So—” At which point she heaved a deep sigh. “I decided to take the easy option: I joined a call center.” She laughed at Nina’s ill-concealed astonishment. “Of course it was only easy as far as getting accepted was concerned. I wouldn’t recommend it unless you have a serious motive to stay, which I did. I had a kid to raise since my husband walked out.”

Nina nodded mechanically as she tried to take in all this, unable to think of anything to say. Instead, she motioned the waiter over to bring the menu, but her teacher shook her head.

“Not for me. I already take two to three cups at work to keep me up all night,” she explained. “You should see yourself, Nina. You look positively shocked! I know... Whatever happened to the stuff I used to tell you girls about going after your dreams, doing great things and saving marriage and kids for later, right?”

“Oh no,” she replied quickly with a vigorous shake of her head. “I wasn’t thinking that at all, Miss. I was just thinking how so much has happened...”

“Yeah, time flies... Twelve years now, isn’t it?” her teacher nodded, though somewhat absentmindedly. “I still teach some English, but only part-time, at a Korean school,” she continued, as if sensing Nina’s vague disappointment that the mentor she had admired now

deployed her knowledge of English to take inane phone calls from strangers instead of shaping the minds and tongues of students. “That’s actually why I’m here—the school is just around the corner. I teach two one-hour classes in the afternoon then head off to the call center for the night shift.”

“Wow...”

“There’s nothing ‘wow’ about it if you have to do it.” The woman smiled again, shrugging. “But enough about me! I heard you’ve also gotten hitched!”

“Who told you?” she asked, narrowing her eyes in surprise, since she’d kept the news of her marriage to a tight circle of family and friends.

“Chris, who else? I was godmother at her son’s christening and she filled me in on the latest on everyone.”

“She’s got a kid now? I thought she said she’s never gonna have one, the traitor.” She smiled, remembering her high school best friend and the silly pact they made about eschewing men and babies all their lives. Well, it wasn’t as if she’d kept her end of the deal.

“Two... And she said your hubby’s some kind of big-shot hotelier in Singapore or something?”

“Big shot!” she laughed. It was just like Chris to make a mountain out of a molehill. “No, not really... And it’s India, not Singapore. The wedding was in Singapore because I was working there at the time. That’s also why we kept it small and quiet—just our families and some friends from there. I wonder how Chris found out about it. We’d already lost contact by then... I’m quite impressed you two have managed to stay in touch.”

“Well, that’s the wonder of Friendster and Facebook.”

“But I don’t use either!” she protested.

“Which doesn’t mean that those who do can’t talk about you. You might say it even makes you fair game... What was that I read the other day? ‘Whatever happened to Nina, our class valedictorian? Why the heck isn’t she on Friendster? Maybe she doesn’t want us friending her and asking for free rooms at her hubby’s hotel! Ha ha ha, just kidding!’”

Nina groaned, then added, grinning, “*Big-shot* hubby, don’t forget.”

They had a good laugh. Then, wiping the corners of her eyes, her teacher asked. “So you live in India now?”

“Yeah...” Nina replied tentatively, wondering how she would react. She had grown used to getting two kinds of stock reactions whenever people heard that she was now based in the South Asian country. One would be the ‘Hindu head wobble’ as she’d nicknamed it—that circular movement of the head that reminded her of the cheap plastic tigers sold on the streets to be displayed on car dashboards, whose heads were loosely joined to their bodies at the neck so that they bobbed idiotically at the passengers whenever the car was in motion. This reaction she would let pass with a tolerant air of amusement. But the second response she found more off-putting, a symptom, in her view, of the speakers’ narrow-mindedness and lack of cosmopolitanism. “You live in India?” they might say with the same incredulity you’d expect of someone who’d just heard that you came from another planet. “I hope you have a good supply of White Flower? Or are you immune to it already? Or—oh my God, don’t tell me you’ve picked it up yourself!” At which point her interlocutors would erupt into giggles as they sniffed the air close to her armpits.

At such times, she would find herself at pains to explain that this BO thing was merely a side effect of the diet of some Indians, a quirk that one quickly got used to, living alongside them. “It’s got something to do with the *masala* they use, you know,” she would say with the air of a

teacher lecturing a class of slow learners, which often had the desired effect of arresting the tittering around her. “It’s the stuff they use to flavor their dishes. You like curries and kebabs, you gotta live with the consequence.”

Only, what masala was made of exactly she couldn’t name, any more than she could name the deities that comprised the Hindu pantheon. Its composition was as varied as the cuisines of the subcontinent, with each region adding their own unique ingredient to the mixture of spices. Luckily, this gap in her knowledge never posed a problem because nobody ever asked her to elaborate. But, for good measure, in case the masala tack hasn’t sufficiently impressed her listeners, she would add, “Besides, they consider it sexy in some countries to have a smell. Sterilized, deodorized folks like us won’t get a second look in those places.”

“A second sniff, you mean,” somebody might retort, whereupon Nina would rest her case, sprinkling the metaphorical dust from her feet on the bigots.

But she needn’t have worried about her former mentor’s reaction.

“The call center where I work is Indian-owned, you know. Have you heard of HTMT Hinduja?”

“Of course I’ve heard of them! They’re one of the big names there, like Tata and Birla...”

The names didn’t seem to register with her teacher, who was saying in a wistful tone, “Sometimes, they even send some managers to train there at our head office. I’m expecting a promotion soon, fingers crossed, so who knows, maybe I could visit you there.” Then with a grin, she added, “Maybe then I’d get a free room at your hubby’s hotel!”

“Fat chance, Miss.” Nina shook her head, smiling. “You come to India, you stay at our place.”

Nina had a great deal staked on this visit to Manila—a lot more than she cared to admit. The event that had precipitated it had also taken place in a coffee shop. In fact, she noted, everything in her life seemed to revolve around cafés these days. The coffee shop in question was a hole-in-the-wall in Delhi’s Defence Colony Market run by an expatriate Italian, which served up reliable wi-fi and the best cappuccino that side of town. There she was, tapping away unsuspectingly on her laptop, when a basso voice bellowed her name, sending it bouncing off the whitewashed walls of the tiny café, and a turbaned guy approached her table.

“Oh, Mr. Kapoor.”

“What’s a nice girl like you doing here by yourself? And what else do we have here? A laptop! You don’t happen to be chatting online with a boyfriend away from Andy’s prying eyes, do you?” He settled comfortably in the opposite chair, uninvited.

Nina cringed. “I hate to disappoint you, Mr. Kapoor, but it’s nothing romantic like that. I’m working on a business plan, that’s all. Andy’s out of town and won’t be back until tomorrow so I thought I’d work here.” She kept on typing, hoping the guy would take the cue and stop pestering her. But the tactic backfired and he scooted his chair closer to hers to read what was on the screen over her shoulder.

“Tsk tsk tsk... He’s always out of town ever since he joined that new team, isn’t he?”

“It’s the *international* business development team, so naturally...” she shrugged.

“Well, if he’s gonna be jet-setting, he should at least take his wife with him! Anyway, so much for your husband. I’m more interested in your—did you say business plan?” He reached for the mouse and scrolled up the document she was working on. “Ah, yes, here we are. A business plan, indeed! For a coffee-cum-bookshop, no less. I see... You’ve enrolled in one of

these distance MBA courses and this is your case study, isn't it? What's with these distance-learning programs anyway? Even our office janitor seems to be interested in signing up for one."

"I'm not studying for an MBA, Mr. Kapoor," she retorted, clapping the laptop close. There was no use trying to keep working. "It's for my business. Not 'my' as in *mine*, of course." She drew imaginary quotation marks in the air with her fingers. "Andy's gonna finance it so it's gonna be *ours* in that sense. But I'll be running the show, so to speak."

The guy threw up his hands theatrically. "What's the world coming to! I better talk to that absentee husband of yours. What business has he putting a nice lady like you to work like that? If I even so much as suggest it to my Priya, I'll be sleeping out in the cold that very night."

"Mr. Kapoor—"

"Such formality! Please, just Rajeev."

"Um, Rajeev." Nina wriggled her chair backwards, noticing in spite of her consternation, that the guy had diminished the space between them uncomfortably. "Actually, it was *my* idea, not Andy's? Of course he was more than happy when he heard about it, and he's been *very* supportive." She decided to leave out the long discussion they had—or rather, the long discourse Andy had given—about this being the "Age of Kindle" and how a café might prove profitable, but a book café would most certainly turn out to be a dud. Anyway, what mattered was that he had come around in the end, saying that they were young and could afford to take risks, with a sincerity that brought tears to Nina's eyes. "You might be surprised to know, Mr. Kapoor, um, Rajeev, that many women nowadays prefer to have a fair measure of independence from their spouses." That ought to put the jerk in his place, she added to herself. My Priya! God help Andy if she ever caught him speaking so proprietarily about her to his friends.

“Ah, a feminist, how nice! Well, my Priya will just have to put off any ideas of ‘independence,’ as you put it. She’s on the family way, you know. Seven months. Although seeing her belly you’d think the little bugger would pop out any minute!” Then, switching from his proud-daddy-to-be voice to a commiserating hush-hush tone, he added, “Well, I suppose the poor guy figures he can afford to let you play shop for as long as the pelican with the bundle remains elusive.”

Nina sat back, speechless. She imagined the creep crowing to Andy about his impending daddy-hood just a year after tying the knot, and ribbing her husband about picking up a few tricks from him to get out of his own four-year heirless rut. But the guy kept going, not seeming to notice the murderous look Nina was giving him.

“How nice to catch you here though! I just dropped in to pick up some pastries for my Priya’s baby shower this evening. Men off-limits, of course. How’s that, huh? We bring the grub and we can’t even taste it! Which gives me an idea... Why don’t you and I try that new Japanese resto at Taj Mahal Hotel tonight? Oh, don’t look so scandalized! Surely it wouldn’t hurt to dine at the competition once in a while? Don’t worry. I won’t mention a thing to Andy.” He flashed her a good-toothed smile.

Nina reached for her glass of cold coffee, suddenly wishing it was something stronger. She took a long drink and with a supreme effort, mustered a burst of passable laughter. The situation was so absurd there was no way out but to make a joke of it. “I know your style, Mr. Kapoor. Think you’ll wine and dine the wife to win the husband’s heart, don’t you? Well, let me save you the trouble. I don’t meddle with Andy’s hotel affairs, but as far as I know, they’re perfectly happy with you supplying their mattresses.” With that, she gestured for the waiter to bring the bill and started gathering her things.

The guy, finally seeming to catch on, also rose to his feet. “Well, whew! Thanks for saving my credit card a workout! I better run along now or my Priya will have a fit. Goodbye and do give my regards to Andy. Glad to hear the old boy is happy with our mattresses!” Then giving her a meaningful wink, he added, “After all, my Priya and I personally test each of them.”

The infuriating encounter blackened Nina’s mood the rest of the day and all through the next. She counted the hours impatiently until Andy’s return so she could tell him what happened, but when finally the chauffeured hotel car deposited him at their gate, she found that she couldn’t bring herself to talk about it. Instead, she asked him to recount every detail of his trip over dinner to crowd out her own thoughts, and afterwards, busied herself with the plan for the book café, which was slowly but surely coming together. She was keen to give it a name as soon as possible, thinking that it would make the enterprise feel more tangible and real.

“Honey, what do you think of ‘Reads and Roasts’?”

“Roasts? I didn’t know we’d be serving up barbeque. Why not throw in some kebabs while we’re at it?”

“You know perfectly what I mean, Andz.” She shot him a warning glance.

“Well, I just thought we better avoid confusing people. After all, not everyone knows their coffee beans and what’s done to them before they’re served up in a Starbucks cup.” He shrugged.

“How about ‘Books and Brews,’ then? I want people to know right away that we don’t just serve up coffee but also literature. I was thinking of ‘Browse and Brews’ at first, but it sounds kinda weird having a verb and noun together, don’t you think?”

“*I think* you have a serious fixation with blank-and-blank names.”

Nina glared at him in disbelief. “Oh, do you? Well, if you have some beef about it, mister, I suppose you have some great ideas of your own?”

“Oh, I don’t know... Maybe if you ask nicely enough.”

“This is as nice as you’re gonna get. Come on, let’s hear them!”

“Fine, my dear. It’s a café, isn’t it? And cafés are usually associated with which country?

Exactly: France. So, it stands to reason that a French-sounding name would be our best bet.”

Nina realized with a sinking feeling that he was in a resolutely flippant mood, completely at odds with her own disposition.

“Say for example, Café Librew. *Cah-feh leeh-brooh.*” He spoke with a mock French accent, kissing the tips of his bunched-up fingers. “Ah... madmwazelle daz nat like eet?” He pretended to twirl the ends of an imaginary mustache. “*Pas de probleme.* Perhaps deez one will pleeze her: Café La Basa. No no no no, not Lavazza. La Basa.”

“You guys think women are a joke, don’t you?”

Andy fell back on the sofa, a stunned look on his face, and it was only then that Nina realized how angry her voice sounded. Out of nowhere, hot tears welled up in her eyes and she knew that this wasn’t about Andy but that prick Rajeev and the cheap stunt he’d tried to pull on her. She didn’t have the guts to tell her husband what had happened, and worse, his being another male made him the perfect fall guy for the jerk.

“Geez, Nins. Just having a little fun, that’s all.”

“Look, Andy. Have fun, but not at my expense. You measure your days in deals sealed, dollars earned and guests served. And how do I measure mine? In kitty lunches, spa visits and dates with my husband whenever he’s in town!” She gulped back her tears. “Just for once, I try to do something a little more consequential, and how do you guys treat me? Like something to be toyed and trifled with instead of a thinking grownup!”

“I—I had no idea you felt that way...” he stammered. “We guys?”

“Well, I do! I want to be part of the action, Andy, instead of just cheering you on from the sidelines. I wasn’t like this once.” She rained liberal punches on the gaily embroidered bolsters and pillows on the sofa. “I was class valedictorian, for Pete’s sake. I edited the school paper!”

“You said you wanted the café as a hobby, Nins. How was I supposed to know it meant *this* much to you.” He looked at her, and the pillows, helplessly.

“Did you really expect me to advertise my insecurities? Well, they’re out of the bag now so I hope you’re happy!”

They sat across each other silently for some time, licking their own wounds. Then Andy moved over to her side and gently nudged her. “Hey, for the record, I never thought of you as something, or someone, to be toyed or trifled with. But I’m really glad you told me all this. And I hope you’d also tell me whatever else you’ve got hidden up there.” He gave her a soft, playful rap on the forehead. “Hey, Nins. You had me behind you one hundred percent on this before—make it two hundred now, okay? Peace?”

Nina looked at his proffered hand for a long time, then finally, heaving a sigh, answered, “I’d say truce.”

“Oh, all right,” he groaned. “Truce.”

Two days after the armistice, he broached the idea of her taking a trip to Manila.

“You’re not trying to buy my good graces, are you?” she asked him suspiciously, hiding her excitement at the prospect of visiting home after two years.

“No, my dear. It’s a business mission, not a bribe. You think you can come up with a sound business plan a thousand miles away from where you’re setting up?”

She had to admit it made sense. For all she knew, she was building a house of cards with all these tidbits—where to source the best coffee beans at the best price, which is the hippest,

happening place in Manila, how much a barista gets paid on average there—that could fall apart the moment it is touched by the breeze of ground realities: the bureaucracy, competition and various other pitfalls that would sink all but the hardiest aspiring entrepreneurs.

Grudgingly, she accepted the offer, and three days later, she was on a Singapore Air flight to Manila, sipping a martini in business class. She saw this as another peace overture of Andy's, but he flatly denied it. This, he insisted, was how a real business woman traveled.

4

Nina gave her mother a peck on the forehead as she opened the gate. The grey-haired woman was about to retract the hand she'd extended for her daughter to touch to her forehead when Nina placed a small gift-wrapped parcel in it. "For you, Ma. See if you like it."

"What's this?" her mother asked, looking at the package with feigned suspicion, which turned to feigned annoyance when she saw what was inside. "Ay, Nina, you've been showering me and your dad with gifts since you came. What use does an old woman like me have for such a fancy purse? I never dress up now except when I'm asked to be a *ninang* at a wedding. You'll have more use for this!"

"Keep it, Ma. Help me salve my guilty conscience."

Nina grinned as her mother took the bait. "You don't have to be guilty about leaving me and your father, Nina. That's the way life is, the young ones make a life for themselves and desert their parents. It doesn't make you a bad daughter..."

"Someone's been watching too many *telenovelas* again!" Nina declared in a sing-song voice.

"What, you'll deprive an old woman of her only pastime?" she grumbled.

"Old? You're 62, Ma. Grandma Moses started painting in her seventies."

“Moses’ grandma painted?” Her mother regarded her dubiously. “I don’t remember reading that in the Bible, and I’ve been reading it a good deal these days, child.”

“Grandma Moses, Ma. The American painter? Nevermind. Just keep it, all right? I got myself another one. You’re gonna be sponsoring more weddings, I’m sure...” She had gotten her mom an identical clutch when she went to pick up the size-10 shoes at Powerplant. “Where’s Dad anyway?”

“Turned in early as usual. He’s no spring chicken anymore, you realize? He, for one, doesn’t seem too...” she said in a stage whisper. “Ay, you know you’re getting old when people start getting you as a *ninang* for their weddings. Not too long ago people were asking me to be the godmother of their children. I prefer that too, I tell you. The ceremony’s much shorter and you don’t have all these *ninangs* trying to upstage each other but looking *gurang* all the same alongside the young bridesmaids and flower girls.” She clucked her tongue as she busied herself on the stove reheating the food for her daughter’s dinner.

“Don’t worry. You might be attending another baptism before you know it,” Nina murmured lightly. She was surprised when her mom spun around, hands on hips, having assumed she wouldn’t hear the quip.

“What did you say? Uy, Nina! Are you— Ay, you’re just teasing your old mother, aren’t you? You know we’ve been praying for the longest time that you and Andy...”

“My, Ma, your ears are sharp as ever, for all this ‘old woman’ charade!”

Her mother ignored her. “What’s wrong with that husband of yours anyway? You need to see a fertility doctor or something? I’d have thought that won’t be a problem there in India. They even have fertility cults there, I heard... And having produced the *Kama Sutra* you’d think...”

“Ma, nothing’s wrong with Andy. Or me. I’m sure if we try, we can— And what does the Kama Sutra have to do with this?” She sighed and threw up her hands in surrender “*This* is why I avoid getting started on this topic. Just forget what I said, okay, Ma? Hey, is that— *kare-kare!*”

She wasn’t really upset and even found herself enjoying the banter with her mom. But the conversation was veering towards a direction she was just starting to come to terms with, and her favorite dish was a welcome diversion.

It would have been unthinkable when she was younger, to have such an exchange with her parents. Any attempt at a rejoinder by her and her brother would have been fouled in those days. She welcomed this change in her mom and dad, though others unnerved her. She noticed, for instance, that they now increasingly referred to themselves in the third person, instead of using “I,” something they only used to do when she and her brother were little. Back then, they would say, “Neil, see how Mommy eats all her vegetables!” “Nina, Daddy’s just going to work, okay?” Now, it was “An old woman this... your old father that...”

There was more. She had wanted to take them on a trip to El Nido to make up for her long absence, but they opted instead for a day trip to Tagaytay. With much preamble to reassure her that they appreciated her kind offer, they reasoned that it would only be a waste of her money if they end up cooped up in their hotel room, exhausted from the plane journey, as they were wont to be if they proceeded to Palawan.

“As you get older, *anak*, you long for the simple joys of life,” her father had said as they were served steaming bowls of *bulalo* at a roadside eatery in Tagaytay. “Like this, for instance. The tonic of youth, your Uncle Pabs and I call it. Would they have this in Palawan? Of course I still swear by your mom’s version, but she would never let me touch the marrow or even a bit of fat! Here on the other hand...” And he tackled with relish the fat-laced beef floating like islands

surrounded by the flotsam of cabbage, potato and carrot slices in a broth slick and rainbowy with grease.

“As if you don’t have it on the sly in Max’s and Barrio Fiesta, tsk tsk tsk!” her mother cried. “And I’m sure that’s the least of what you eat behind my back. Let me guess what else—*sisig*, *lechon*...”

“*Chicharon*, *crispy pata*...” Nina added teasingly.

“You two are worse than my doctor,” her dad grumbled, adding another piece to the sculpture of beef bones beside his plate, all picked clean of meat, fat and marrow. “Besides, this place has such lovely memories for me and your mom. The four of us used to come here every summer, remember?” And he lapsed into one of those bouts of nostalgia that Nina was alarmed to notice visited him and her mother with growing frequency.

“If only I could bring some of your kare-kare back with me to India, Ma,” she sighed, snapping back to the present. She mixed the peanut-flavored stew reddened with achiote seeds with some boiled rice, added a little *bagoong*, and ate in messy mouthfuls, like a child.

“Well, why not? I can freeze it for you and keep it in an ice box that’ll fit in your suitcase.” And her mother made as if to start doing just that.

She shook her head. “I doubt it’ll keep through the flight and the long stop-over.”

“Ah, then do the next best thing. Eat up! Have your fill! I cooked that for you after all. Your dad was sulking because I wouldn’t let him have any of the ox tail and tripe. Really, he’s getting to be quite a stubborn old man, your dad.”

“You’re too hard on him, Ma.”

Later, she insisted on clearing up and persuaded her mom to head off to bed. “Go on, Ma. You don’t want to keep your boyfriend waiting.”

“Whoosh waifing?” she asked, brushing her dentures on the sink. “Shleeping like a baby, you mean.”

Nina did the dishes as quietly as she could, then let herself out the back door and carefully made her way up the rickety steps to the old roof deck. She used to go up there to make calls on her mobile phone back during the days when cell sites were few and far between and getting a signal was a matter of luck, location and timing. Later, when the reception improved, she would still gravitate to the roof deck whenever she needed to make calls, partly for privacy but mostly out of sheer force of habit. Even earlier, the roof deck had served as some kind of makeshift observatory where they would sit together as a family, watching the rare Perseid or Leonid shower, an occasional solar or lunar eclipse, or the simple stippling of constellations on a clear night when there was a brown-out. Nina smiled at the memories while she dialed their house number in Delhi. Andy picked up at the fourth ring.

“Hello?”

As she heard his voice, Nina was assailed by a shyness worthy of a convent school girl on her first date. “Honey?”

“Hey, is that you, Nins?”

“Who else would it be, silly?”

“Strange for you to ring the house instead of my mobile, that’s all. Checking that your husband’s in and not fooling around, aren’t you?” He seemed to be in a good mood. She could hear the TV in the background, and judging from the high-pitched singing, a Bollywood flick was on. That was his guilty pleasure, Bollywood movies. It was the sixth toe he tried to keep hidden from everyone but Nina and his parents.

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch you one of these days.”

“Well, just keep it short, will you? My girlfriend might be calling.” He sensed that the edge was gone from her voice and felt at liberty to tease her. The trip was clearly a success.

“So, how’s it going?”

“What? Um, great, yes, everything’s just dandy.” She bit her lip, hoping that he wouldn’t probe. How could she tell him that after her first few days in Manila, when she had eagerly pounded the pavements for a possible location for the café, collected stacks of forms from dusty government offices, met with book distributors and endured sleepless nights after imbibing more caffeine than was good for her in the name of scoping the competition—that after all this, she had simply found herself, and the project, running out of steam?

How could she explain to him what had cooled the boiler and cut the engine? The sight of her parents aging irreversibly, like dolls getting the final touches on a factory conveyor belt: grey hair (2007), liver spots (2008), slight stoop (2009), cataract, incontinence, memory loss (coming soon), on and on towards the packaging section where the boxes are not made of cardboard, plastic and bubble wrap but of wood, glass and satin... And the spectacle of someone she’d admired and placed on a pedestal buffeted by life, forced to make compromises, and taking it all on the chin...

“Zeroed in on a name yet?” His voice snapped her back to the present.

“Um... Not quite. Still waiting for inspiration to strike, you might say.” Time to change the topic. “So how was the Maldives?” she asked, a little too brightly, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Oh, unbelievable! You know those pictures you see on magazines with the sea so blue you think they must’ve done some Photoshop on them? It looks *just like that*. Then, you go near the water, rubbing your eyes, and when you look down, it’s clear as a sheet of glass and you see all

these spectacular fish going about their business like they're in some giant aquarium. You should see it, Nins! The boss said I should bring you next time."

"Well, he'd better mean it because after what you told me, nobody could stop me from tagging along!"

"Oh, he means it, don't worry," he assured her, adding somewhat pompously, "You're married to his blue-eyed boy, aren't you?"

"So I take it the Cebu posting's pretty much a done deal?"

"Unless your husband fucks up big-time in the next two years."

"Hey, watch the language, mister."

"Messes up. Messes up big-time."

"Not *that*, silly. Ditch the third person. Say 'I'."

"I what?"

"Never mind!" The image of herself swinging on a hammock on a deserted white strand practically made her forget her nervousness at what she was about to tell him next. "Anyway... honey?"

"Yes?"

"Remember that thing we're not supposed to discuss right now?"

Pregnant silence. "Um... no. Care to remind me?"

"Andy. You know very well what I'm talking about." Expectant pause.

"Well, now that you say it, yes. How can I forget it, Nins? I have that discussion with myself *every day*." The TV had either been turned off or muted, a sign that she had his undivided attention. It wasn't easy to tear him away from the screen when a Bollywood film was in full swing.

“Yes, exaggerate.” She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, what I wanted to say is that...um... I think I’m ready to have that discussion when I get back.” The latter part of the statement was said in such a rush, she practically stumbled over the words. A full minute of silence went by. “Honey?”

“*Hallelujah!* Tell me I heard you right—you’re ready to talk about it? Whoo-pee! Hang on for a moment, will you?” She heard a loud thump-thump on stuffed leather and pictured him doing a Tom Cruise on the sofa. “So, you’ll be back Friday night, right? Boy oh boy, I can’t wait! But *wait* a minute...” A chink, ever so small, appears in his armor of joy. “Aren’t you forgetting something, Nins? What about the café?”

“We have our whole lives ahead of us, don’t we, Andz?” she asked rhetorically, taking a deep breath. Maybe when we get the Cebu posting... I don’t know how I was planning to pull it off in the first place. With your work there in India...” She shook her head, looking at the sky. It was one of those dreamy, moonlit nights. “It was crazy, Andy, you were right.”

“I never said it was crazy, hey.” He was calmly seated on the sofa now, feeling like the world’s luckiest bastard.

“But I’m sure you were thinking it.”

“No, I wasn’t... Oh, all right! I thought it was a bit—whimsical.”

“And now this, huh? Yes, go ahead and say it: *Woman, thou art fickle.*” She accompanied the six syllables with a tap-tap-tap of her finger on the keypad.

“Well, if this is fickleness, don’t ever change, Miss Masala!”

“*Miss Masala?*” she repeated in surprise.

“You know. Intense, hot...mutable...”

“Point taken, mister. I like that though: Miss Masala... Hey, brainwave!” She snapped her fingers, wide-eyed with inspiration. “Wouldn’t ‘Masala’ make a great name?”

A hush falls at the other end. “Um, I agree an Indian name would be nice, love?” He only ever called her ‘love’ when he was feeling amorous or agitated, as he was now. “But I was thinking more along the lines of Sameera for a girl or Sohan for a boy. Masala’s kind of—”

“No, silly. The *other* baby! The café.”

“Oh... Oh!” He exhaled in relief, suddenly feeling like a dolt.

“*Café Masala*. We can make it Indian-themed, with Madhubani paintings on the walls, Fabindia furniture, and *ragas* for muzak... Whaddyathink?” She was practically hopping with excitement.

“Pardon me, but where does the ‘reads’ and ‘browse’ part fit into all this?” Andy inquired, eyebrows raised. “Don’t we want people to know right away that we serve up literature as well as lattes? Hey, there you go! Another contender: ‘Lit and Lattes’.”

“Well, I thought hard about it and I have to admit you had a point about the Kindle thing... Anyway, we’re not *fixated*, are we? We *adapt* to new realities... So, whaddyathink?”

“Frankly? Fickle, fickle, fickle.” Andy grinned. The news of his imminent shot at fatherhood had put him in a royal mood and he was enormously enjoying the repartee.

“Thank you. Now can we have your opinion on the name please?”

“Café Masala...” He rolled the words inside his mouth, trying the sound of it. “Café Masala...”

“We-ell?”

“Not bad... Not bad at all,” he conceded, having a brainwave of his own. “And if you say we can have Bollywood nights once a week? I’d say it’s perfect.”