

Disappearances

synopsis

Rina Robles, a child actress who becomes a starlet then a governor's mistress, goes missing from the Greenhills condominium where the politician has been keeping her. The unnamed male narrator, also a resident, relates how one night he saw a mysterious sight: Rina Robles falling slowly in the air past his balcony window in the wee hours of the morning. He remembers because on that same day he and his girlfriend have a big fight and break up. The former actress' body is nowhere to be found, however, and after a brief period of excitement she never turns up and is largely forgotten. About a year later, the narrator strikes up a friendship with a woman who also lives in the same condo, someone to whom he feels the need to confess the strange sight, which he has never revealed to anyone. She has her own revelation to make: she was with a man for years who disappeared mysteriously while serving as a doctor in a remote barrio in Central Luzon, and she hasn't seen or heard from her since. She too saw Rina Robles falling that very same night the narrator did.

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IT FINALLY MADE the news: Rina Robles was missing. Her real name was Maria Regina Robrigazo, said the paper, but she had gone by Rina Robles since forever. I remember her from those inane late-afternoon variety shows which Zeny, our housemaid, would be watching when I got to our San Juan home from school, Rina in bright yellow or pink blouses on top of black miniskirts, a gangly and grinning teenager in the company of other awkward teens who believed, or had been told, that they had looks and talent. My childhood is scarred, among other things, by the memory of watching her dance alongside a thick-thighed Alma Moreno. Then when I was in college and old enough to drive I took my car to a shop on Santolan, where a large calendar on the back wall featured Rina Robles in all her pale-skinned glory for rum-addled bums to gawk at. Some girls had debuts; many in Rina's line of work took their clothes off. From her neck hung long threads of gold, which was all she wore, and the straight shimmering lines contrasted nicely with her oh-so-grownup curves. She came out in a TV series (she played the charmingly brain-dead love interest of the male lead), a few movies (an action movie with Bong Revilla, a comedy with Dolphy), then disappeared from the public eye. I didn't think about her for years. Then I started seeing her in the same building I lived.

Elysia is a condominium in Greenhills that overlooks the shopping center. I

moved into it five years ago, and you can't live here long without knowing about Rina Robles. You would bump into her from time to time, or hear her name spoken by the staff or the security guards in front. "It's Miss Rina," one said as I hovered about the lobby picking up my junk mail and bills. I turned to look past the double doors at the driveway, where a Hi-Ace had stopped. Two burly men with bad moustaches, aviators, and jackets descended in a comic flurry of action, as if assassins would spring from just around the corner. Then a woman in heels and short denim shorts descended, her pale slim legs grabbing your eye first. I'd hated the heels-and-shorts combination the moment it went in style – lots of young girls love it but have no idea how to pull it off – but I guess it depends on the quality of the distance between them. No one would confuse her with any of the younger faces you now see on TV – and I saw enough of them just on the small set the guards kept in the lobby to keep them awake, their voices tinny, hair slicked and smooth, skin scrubbed to a shine under the lights. Rina used to be one of them. She was pretty as the rest, a longish tisyay face, large kind eyes, and a cute laugh that sounded like a squeal stuck in the throat. Her shoulders were too narrow, which made her bosom seem too full – she sometimes looked like she would fall over – but the long slim legs were killer. Two decades after her star waned she still had them, though the rest of her had, shall we say, moved on. And she could croon half-decently. She put out an album of pop songs once. The producers gave her a nickname: the album cover proclaimed her Rina "Ring-Ring" Robles, and in the photo her lips formed a bow-shaped pout. *Jingle* magazine said it was terrible. It was; when my younger sister entered the no-man's land of tasteless teenagerhood, she bought a cassette and played it too many times.

The limits of her singing talent didn't matter to Rigoberto "Bobit" Magadia. A governor of some northern province where dozens died at every election,

Magadia fancied the starlet, and soon she would be seen on his arm everywhere he went, never mind that he was already married. (This was about the time she was making movies.) The good governor made it into the papers a few years ago when he had his wife's lover beaten to a bloody pulp. On the show I caught in the lobby TV, his head looked like a peeled swollen fruit that had been dropped too many times. "Poor bastard," Lito the security guard said. Mrs Evangeline Magadia has probably learned the error of her ways and is now utterly devoted to her loving husband.

Shortly after I moved in Rina Robles did too, and I saw her often. We all did. I would bump into her maybe once or twice a week, at the 7-11 nearby, her face emerging from behind a rack of potato chips or cup noodles, or going to the Wash-and-Wish (that you'd done a better job? taken your laundry elsewhere?) just past the school with a huge image of a female saint painted on its facade, or just walking through the lobby. She would barely acknowledge you, maybe nod a little, her eyes flitting nervously about behind large sunglasses, before passing you by. I was down in the lobby a lot just chatting with the guards or Meng the receptionist, if not walking out in the street or through the shopping center. You can't stay all day in a thirty-two-square-meter studio and not go crazy.

Then she suddenly became scarce. The guards told me they hadn't seen her in days. Of course they would notice; there was nowhere else for her to go if she went out anywhere, and besides, there was always a fat bodyguard or two with her. And where would she go? She was always driven around in the van if she didn't make short trips to the convenience store or the laundry. Crossing the street meant going into the shopping center, Greenhills Theater, V-Mall (the new and deodorized version of Virra Mall, haven of pirated goods), which also meant at least a pair of goons with her. Now they all said they hadn't seen her for a while. Sure, sometimes she wouldn't appear for two or three days right after

Governor Bobit visited. She would descend later, the dark spots around her eyes or on her arms almost gone or hidden behind the big shades and long sleeves, and she could pretend that everything was fine, it was great being a politician's kept woman, and no one would tell her otherwise.

I was in the lobby late one afternoon when the good governor came out of the elevator – sunglasses two decades too late to be hip, a hairpiece subtle as steel wool, a barong tagalog stretched over a gut the size of his province – looking really angry. Everyone around him looked scared, like he would turn and flip him through a glass panel in a heartbeat. I thought she'd taken a real rough one from his fists, except he never came down looking like this. He always looked big, even cocky, like a boxer who'd thumped some prick dumb enough to get into the ring with him. I guess slapping around a defenseless woman made him feel like a man. But today he looked like he'd been beaten, as if the dumb prick had hit back and laid him on the canvas. The guys around him were jumpy, and it made me nervous being around a roomful of nervous men who have guns tucked into their pants.

The entourage left, everyone let out a breath, and Meng started talking from behind the counter. He's never like this, she said, and I agreed. Later she told me the reason for the governor's agitation: Rina wasn't in her unit. Nobody knew where she was. The last time Gov Bobit visited she was there, then the next day she wasn't. No one – the goons, the maid, the cook – had seen her leave. They were there when the gov was there, then went to bed that night, and when they woke up the next day the miss was nowhere to be found. Worse, they let more than a whole day pass before letting him know. Maybe she'd gone out by herself and would return later, they thought, and didn't think it worth the bother to tell him. The welts on the maid's face told us what the gov thought of that.

A few nights later Meng told me that a woman claiming to be Rina's mother

showed up that morning demanding to see her. The most Meng could do was ring her room, but of course they said she wasn't there. The woman demanded to know where she was, demanded that she be allowed to go upstairs and check for herself, and of course Meng and Boyet (who was on duty at the time) couldn't let her. She shouted and fumed and finally left. Then the news was on TV and in the papers (both the *Inquirer* and *Star* devoted a few inches to the story in their metro sections) because the woman had gone to the press. We saw her face on *TV Patrol* weeping with anger, claiming that Gov Bobit had had her killed and gotten rid of the body.

During all of this, nobody had bothered to ask me anything. Of course. Why would they? And if they did, I might not have told anyone the truth anyway: that I was the last one to see her alive. I didn't know it at the time. I wasn't even sure what I had seen exactly, if I had seen anything. It was only after the news broke and I'd pieced together the details – when she'd last been seen, when she disappeared – that I figured out what had happened.

Rina Robles was last seen on a Saturday, the first one of April. That was the day Clara broke up with me. We had been together two years and making plans. I thought she was the one I could settle down with, and after nearly a dozen girlfriends and flings, I thought this was finally it. I was turning thirty-six later in the year, and it made me happy to know that finally, finally, someone thought I wasn't completely hopeless after all. And then it ended, this one with a big fight. It had started small, as most fights do – I had forgotten to pay some bills again – but it blew up quickly. She called me thoughtless and selfish and broke stuff, and I think I called her a stupid bitch and broke some more. She got in my face and shouted. Then I hit her. It was more than a slap but not quite a punch; I'd tried to pull it back but couldn't before my open hand got her right on the chin. I was horrified but couldn't bring myself to say sorry. She reeled, put her hand over

her mouth, then the angry tears came.

She walked out of my room. It wasn't even noon and the day felt terribly empty, as if a hole had been blown through it. I went out to the tiangge, the narrow and crowded stalls in the heart of the shopping center, a place so busy and throbbing with life it's the loneliest place I know. I walk there a lot, looking at things without buying, the fake shoes and knockoff bags and tinkly trinkets and cheap watches, the noise and chatter and smells of people who don't care what the fuck you think of them. That afternoon I walked and walked and walked. Maybe Rina Robles had walked here a lot, too.

I had never hit a woman before, and lord knows there were girlfriends who I should have smacked before Clara. Anyone but Clara. But it was her I had hit. Walking along those tight passageways I thought of Governor Bobit, his face fat and oily and smug. He made it a habit to smack his women around, got off on it like some drug. Was I turning into him? How different was I? After all my righteous anger at the way he treated Rina Robles, the only things that separated us were power and money. Were I in his place would I have treated her any better? I felt like thrashing a few stalls right then.

When my feet had had enough I went to Unimart for some beer and went up to my room. I cleaned up the broken mugs, picture frames, and other things that we had thrown. I took out the plastic bags I save for taking out the garbage and started putting Clara's things in them. Pants, blouses, underwear. A few pairs of ratty shoes, slippers worn at the balls of the feet, a few books. Then it was TV time. A documentary on the mating rituals of insects. One on ancient China. Cop shows (who can tell them apart anymore?). CNN, the latest disaster in the Middle East. Then two cooking shows on a channel devoted to cooking shows, as if we don't have anything better to do with our lives than tickle our palates. A rerun of an NBA game between two lousy teams. The tail end of some insipid

Meg Ryan romantic comedy. (You got old, Meg.)

Then I went out to the balcony. It's a joke of a balcony, barely three feet across and six wide, but it's enough so I can put a plastic chair out there, smoke, and drink while watching the rest of the world, or at least what I can see of it: the dark hulk of the Greenhills cinema in shadow, the backside of the Promenade. My room faces an entrance to the shopping center, so I sit and watch the cars disgorging themselves of their dainty girls and snappily dressed guys. I usually stop after two bottles of Red Horse, never more than three. When I finished the sixth I looked at my watch. It was almost four in the morning, and many of the bars and restos had probably closed. Fewer cars, kids standing around smoking, waiters and cooks walking home, less noise wafting from afar.

I thought of Clara. I'd been thinking of her all day, of course, but I thought of her and how I thought things would be different with her. I was a better person with her around, and had cleaned up my act—no more drinking, no more late nights out with the boys or with girls who gave you names you knew weren't theirs—but it wasn't enough. The road you thought you were on turns out to be taking you somewhere else. I got up and leaned on the edge, the only thing that kept me from going over. I closed my eyes and felt the cold concrete against my palms. What if, what if? I stood like that for a while, then when I opened my eyes there she was in front of me.

Falling slowly. Wearing her signature shorts and loose blouse, as if sitting on an invisible chair. Her hands on her lap. Grinning a peaceful grin. Vivid and vibrant and young. I'd forgotten how beautiful she was when she was younger. The lurid calendar in the car shop was wrong, all the images on TV I had seen were wrong. They'd twisted her features into something vulgar, coarse. She was beautiful, really, and the proof was before me. Her calm brown eyes met mine. I thought I heard her speak to me, in my mind, It's okay, everything will be fine.

And she kept drifting slowly downward. Then she was beyond my view.

I shut my eyes again. Then I crumpled into my chair and started to cry. For some stupid reason it all came out, and I sobbed like a stupid little boy who didn't care how silly he looked or sounded, and I cried and cried and cried. For all the stupid things I'd done. For all the stupid years that had gone by in a blur. For all the women who'd seen through me and saw, when they cut through the bullshit I threw up, someone they couldn't possibly love, who they'd been stupid enough to even get close to.

I don't know how long I was out there. When I'd been all cried out I looked up into the dirty darkness of the night. I stood and looked down onto the street. A few cars, people walking, lights going out. Then my vision got bleary and the streetlamps looked like blowtorches burning out my eyes. I crawled into my room and fell onto my bed and lay there for a long time.

When I got up—it was Sunday afternoon—I went downstairs and asked Meng as casually as I could if Rina Robles had made an appearance that day. I expected her to be shocked that I hadn't heard, to fill me in on every grim detail of the late starlet's grisly demise, on how the cops and media people and cameras had made her day a living hell (all this told in breathless excitement). But she shrugged and said no. I couldn't believe it. I walked out onto the sidewalk, crossed the street, then turned to look back at the building. I looked up at my balcony on the ninth floor and then the spot on the concrete road where her body would have been found. It was empty and seemed clean enough for a city street. I looked up at the twenty-first floor, at the balcony twelve floors directly above mine. All this time the eerie vision played again and again in my mind. I ran back up to my room and looked out at the street from the balcony. No sign of anything unusual for miles around. I tried to focus, to remember what I had seen when last I looked out before going back into my room. Had I looked down onto

the street right below? And seen — nothing? No body? I couldn't remember, and it disgusted me. After a while I went to the McDo in front of Shoppersville and turned over the events of the past day in my aching head as I chomped on a Big Mac. Seeing her fall past my balcony in the wee hours — had I dreamed it? Surely I was depressed, I was drunk, my eyes couldn't be trusted. Yes, that was it. Because odds are, when you jump out a window twenty-one floors up you die but leave a body behind.

Except, she really was gone. The story stayed in the news for a while, as such stories do, then died a quiet death. Rina Robles never turned up, and her body was never found. Some police chief promised a thorough investigation, but it came to nothing. Her mother cried righteous tears on TV for a while then disappeared. Gov Bobit didn't show up again, and he put the unit she had been staying in on the market. The notice was on a slip of paper on the corkboard behind Meng; his selling price was three times what I'd paid, and am still paying, on my studio.

For months after I didn't think of Rina Robles anymore, though once in a while, at moments I couldn't predict, I would suddenly see the beatific face in front of mine. As I swept the floor hurriedly once a week, picking up a small item — an earring of Clara's maybe, some other piece of cheap and gaudy costume jewelry she was fond of. Picking hair from out of the shower drain. Drawing up a meager list of supplies to buy. Often just walking along the aisles of the 7-11 brought her back. Or a glimpse of a smooth leg protruding from snug denim shorts. Just walking in the tiangge made me feel that she was nearby, and she would be there before my eyes, the picture of never-wilting youth and beauty, drifting down the night sky.

It was about a year later that I heard her name again. I was sharing wooden bowls of siomai and hakao with Angie. We'd met at an ATM outside the

Greenhills cinema – it was offline, she was behind me, and after it spat out my card I told her we were better off lending our money to drug lords than to this bank, at least they didn't pretend to be upstanding businessmen. She laughed, I became my charming funny self, and later that afternoon we were in a noodle house behind Unimart, one that had been around decades ago when this whole place wasn't crowded and profit-maximized to the gills. It also turned out that she lived at the Elysia, three floors below me, and her unit looked out to the shopping center as mine did. For some reason we were talking about celebrities, maybe because we both spent our working days looking at images of them (I edited video at a production house, she managed photo shoots at a glossy that featured tastefully underdressed women on its covers). She was regaling me with stories of how the agents of nubile starlets and glorified GROs kept bugging her about featuring their clients in her magazine. Occasionally politicians pimped their girlfriends.

"Like Bobit Magadia," she said. "He once asked me what I thought about having Rina Robles on the cover. He was dead serious."

"Rina Robles?"

"Yes! Of all people. I couldn't tell him, sorry, we feature people who are, uh, at least a decade younger and actually still beautiful."

I did my best to chuckle. "She *was* beautiful, in fairness," I said. "When she was younger."

"Yes, she was. People forget that. But this was just a few years ago, when she'd gotten thick around the waist."

"And I guess there's only so much you can do to hide the bruises."

"Ah, yes. Those."

"The things men are capable of."

We took a few moments to chew and slurp. The conversation had hit a tender

spot, and we both knew it. I wonder if I should mention what I knew. Could I trust her to take me seriously? Was this something you brought up with someone you'd just met who you wanted to keep meeting for a while longer? Maybe I'd already said too much.

"It's too bad she was never found," I said.

"Yes, too bad. Poor girl."

"Of course, she's out of her misery."

"I remember her in her sunglasses trying to hide the black eyes. I couldn't look her in the face then."

"I know what you mean."

"I would see her in the 7-11 or Starbucks and I'd feel like taking her hand and asking her if she was alright, if there was anything I could do."

"I don't think we could have done anything."

"Did she have anyone to turn to?"

I didn't know what to say to that, and I thought she laughed nervously.

"Hmm, funny," I said. "We're assuming she's dead."

"True. Though it's been a year. Still, her loved ones must keep on hoping, since they haven't found a body . . ."

"I saw her the day she disappeared." There, I'd blurted it out. "I was the last one to see her alive."

She changed the subject, started talking about work and her jerk of a boss. I didn't press on. I listened attentively, or hoped I seemed to do so. Then we split the bill, and we went out and walked through the tiangge. She said she needed to buy some cold-weather clothes for a visit to her mother in Vancouver, and I joined her. We took our time looking through the sweaters and jackets. I picked out a striped scarf and paid for it, even though she insisted on paying. Our dialogue consisted of words for the things before us, not for the thing we

couldn't see that hung in the air. We were sort of like a couple who'd just had a baby that died.

Hours later she had a few bundles to lug around, and I helped her carry them to a coffee shop at the edge of where the pond used to be, just after the poor excuse of a playground. I was tired from the walking, unusually tired, too tired perhaps to think straight.

"I was the last one to see her alive." My reluctance was gone. It didn't matter now if she hated me for bringing it up again.

"Who?"

"Rina Robles." Before she got a chance to change the subject again I added, "I've never told anyone that."

She didn't answer, just sipped her cappuccino and jabbed at the dry and crumbly slice of carrot cake. For a moment we seemed intent on listening to the whirring of the asthmatic air-conditioner.

"I think I was the last person to see her alive."

Her fork clanked on the plate. She sat up and looked me in the eye. "That's hard to believe."

Suddenly I was testy, as if I was being graded on an exam. It all came out of me in one guilt-wracked blur. It was foolish, reckless. She could have laughed me out of the room. Or clapped me in a straitjacket. I was beyond caring. I knew what I had seen and I told her.

When I was done she was quiet. Then she asked for an ashtray and moved to the open-air section. I joined her.

She started talking about Henry. They'd been together more than two years and had been living in at the Elysia for most of that time. They had decided to get married, then he'd had the bright idea of practicing in a small barrio somewhere in Central Luzon; she couldn't even find it on the map if she had to.

He'd been able to put some money away thanks to his obstetrics practice and had gotten it into his head that he wanted to give something back by spending a year in a barrio, just as a few of his friends had already done. She thought it was awfully idealistic of him, couldn't he put it off a while and think about it some more, but he insisted. I'll be with friends from UP Med, so I'll be safe, he said. He left. He would come back for a day every month. He told me how fulfilling the work was, but that he had to fend off the overzealous evangelicals who condemned him for treating women who'd gotten induced abortions. (How many of them have you treated? I asked. Too many.) Then the soldiers would warn him against helping out the communist rebels, or even their families. It was the same thing for almost a year. Then just a week before his scheduled return, he disappeared. He would text me a few times a day; he suddenly stopped. I was frantic. I called his friends; they told me he'd been picked up one night by armed men. They hadn't seen him since. She'd gone there herself to find him. An uncle and a cousin who were lawyers helped. They didn't find him in hospitals or jails. No one knew anything, no one said anything, certainly not the police and military. She came up against a brick wall. And he had not been heard from since.

Three years to the day after she last saw Henry – it was the first Saturday of April, she remembers – Angie was sitting in her balcony, a bottle of Johnny Walker Black beside her, slowly emptying it as the anniversary wore on. It was very late, she'd lost track of time. At one point she'd stood and looked out onto the street, wondering what it might feel like to jump and land on the concrete. Her skull would explode on impact, scattering her brains on the pavement. She imagined what the scene might be like, as if she were separate from her body, looking down at the corpse of this victim of despair. At least there would be a body to gawk at, even if bits of it had to be scraped off the pavement and put

into a box; the mourners would have a body to grieve over, not some unfilled space made up of dreadfully cold air.

Something inside her coiled tight then snapped, she was about to put one leg over the edge, when she saw her, Rina Robles, floating in space, drifting down as if on a bed of cool night air. Angie had been a huge fan of hers as a child, had bought her album, had learned all the words to the songs, had waited for each episode of each TV show she appeared in, had gotten her mother to accompany her to her movies, and when she got to high school, had turned her obsession into ridicule and marveled at her dreadfully bad taste. Then there she was before her, full flesh and blood, beautiful and young again as she was two decades before when Angie hadn't even known boys or kisses or final goodbyes. Rina had mouthed reassurance, or so Angie thought, before drifting beyond her sight. Then Angie fell back into her chair and wept.

When next she opened her eyes it was morning. She got up and looked out onto the street. Nothing. Then she rushed downstairs and found the sleepy-eyed Meng, who had just arrived. No sign of Rina Robles, no dead body on the pavement, no commotion. Later she heard about Rina going missing and wondered if what she had seen was real.

"I thought it was all a dream," she said.

"That's what I thought, too."

"So we both saw her."

"She really did jump."

It was quiet for a while. Our cigarettes were out and we didn't light new ones.

"But she never hit the ground."

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"No one would believe us."

"No one."

"Where do you think she is now?"

"A better place. I hope."

Later that night we were in her room, a small studio unit just like mine. She made mint tea. We talked some more, but not of the same things. As the night wore on I had the eerie sensation of being with someone who had a huge hole blown through their chest, a hole no one else could see.

A little after midnight I thanked her for the tea, and for the day together, and said she should let me know when she got back from Vancouver so I could take her out. She thanked me too, then as I stepped just outside the doorway and wondered whether I should kiss her, she said, "I'm moving to Vancouver. I can't stand it here anymore. Sorry. Thanks for letting me talk. I needed it. Goodbye."

I stood outside her door long enough to notice how uneven the enameling of the wood was. It remained shut, and instead of going up to my room I took the elevator down then walked out into the balmy evening. Cars came and went, picking up and dropping off the young, the old, those who hadn't known any pain, those who would come to know plenty. The parking building to the right of the cinema obscured V-Mall and some of the night sky, the Promenade to my left obliterated the other half of it. More buildings were going up around me, and taller ones too.

I turn and glance back at the Elysia, at its snaggle-tooth checkerboard of lights on and off, just in case I catch a glimpse of bodies falling. Then I'm suddenly mad at the governor, my face is flushed with it, and if he had been there in front of me I would have pounded my fists into his ugly face again and again. And I'm enraged because I know it would never happen. His goons would mow me

down before I could take a swing at him. I think of myself falling to the ground in a hail of gunfire. In glorious slow-motion, like in a movie. Who knows, perhaps I will disappear before the bullets hit. Or before I touch the pavement. It just might be possible. It is a kind of comfort to know that it could happen, if ever the pain becomes too much to bear.

I walk briskly down the street to work it off and let my blood cool, my impotent fists in my pockets, to where the road curves past the school with the saint on its facade. I'd seen it many times before and still haven't decided if it is merely tasteless or garish. Tonight as I turn to look at it the painted figure stops me in my tracks. I can barely make it out in the darkness and the dirty glow of streetlamps, but it occurs to me – a strange thought that freezes me where I stand – that the woman looks oddly familiar. After a moment of dizziness – I need to blink it away – all I can think of doing is utter a prayer. Santa Maria Regina, forgive me my sins, and let Clara know I'm sorry, I really am. Forgive us all our terrible ignorance of the pain, the frightful pain, we cause others. And give the wounded among us, especially those wounded and abused beyond the tolerance of saints, the strength to endure.