

*'Krystal Hut'* (Short Story, Synopsis)

Years after losing his wife to an illness, a 53-yearold Filipino living in Los Angeles takes tentative steps to find love again. He has two grown-up daughters. Unlike his siblings who have come to America, he lacks a college degree, profession, wealth, or special skill - passports to success as an immigrant. He manages to provide for his family by setting himself up in small business ventures.

After surviving an illness himself, and losing his wife to cancer, he becomes a tax preparer and acknowledges his has been a purely transactional life. His clients become his friends and sort of family, but they fail to fill the void in his heart. He decides to visit the Philippines to find a bride, taunting his US citizenship as his most valuable possession. Sadly, he becomes a victim of scams.

Back in LA, he is urged by one of his daughter to go online; he visits websites on young Pinays seeking love, husband, or pen-pals. He picks a modest-looking woman who happens to be already in Queens, NY, on a tourist visa, working as a companion to an elderly woman. They make a date to meet in Queens, at *Krystal Hut*, a popular Filipino restaurant across from a subway station.

He arrives in New York, full of hope and trepidation. He calls Alma, his sister in New Jersey. Highly successful and married to an American, Alma had sponsored Efren for a green card and helped him get settled in the US. Alma is eager to see him, but Efren rebuffs her. He is uneasy with the burden of gratitude he feels he owes his sister. Or maybe he is just too pre-occupied with his 'blind' date.

At the restaurant, Efren and the girl, Loida, finally meet; he finds her quite alluring and is ready to open his heart to her. She opens up to him, tells him of her intolerable situation as an illegal, abused by her employer, and relying on a few friends' camaraderie. He pities her and wants to help her. But when she suddenly exposes herself, proposes sex and a fake marriage with him – in that order - so she could apply for a green card, Efren is repulsed and turns her down. He wants real love not a business proposition. She calls him cruel and selfish. It is almost midnight when he leaves Loida in the restaurant. He has a last glimpse of her, but it is with unspeakable terror that he will remember it.

## *Krystal Hut*

He flew in from Los Angeles on a red-eye flight to JFK airport to meet a girl in Queens. He had picked her out from scores of faces on an online dating site for *Pinays* and they were seeing each other for the first time.

It was not quite dawn when he checked in at a Best Western hotel near the airport. Although he didn't sleep on the plane Efren was wide-awake. He sat on an armchair in the lobby and turned on his Nikon digital camera to view the pictures he had taken through the scuffed porthole as the plane hovered over New York. He was a trained photographer, but the plane wobbled in the strong headwinds and the shots were all blurry, showing nothing more than glittering lights, like gems strung together in a giant trinket.

"Who is she and where did you find her?" his sister, Alma, in Hoboken, asked excitedly when Efren called her from the hotel lobby. He knew she was an early riser and would only be too happy to hear his voice for he rarely called her and often ignored her phone messages. Alma sounded exuberant, as if she had been up for hours enjoying her second cup of coffee. Still, Efren sensed a trace of censoriousness in her voice as she rattled on: why didn't he call her to say he was coming, why wouldn't he stay with her on this trip, who was the girl?

"Be careful hooking up with strangers especially in .... Why New York?"

"Why not? It's cheaper to fly here than to the Philippines," he said. He laughed mildly.

"True," Alma said. "But you met quite a few girls on the islands -- the nurse, the business-woman from Cebu, a former classmate of yours still single.... I thought you had your mind set on one of them. What happened?"

"Oh, nothing panned out," Efren said. "I'm still looking. It's difficult...." He dismissed her

saying he had to go up to his room to shower, have breakfast and run some errands. “I need to buy some maps and tourist guidebooks. Tickets, too, if I need them. I have to see where I can take her, decide on a restaurant, maybe go to a Broadway show.”

“New York is a very expensive place. What if she doesn’t care about sightseeing and having a night out in the city? You could just be wasting your time and money.”

“I won’t know until I meet her and spend some time with her,” Efren said in the manner of someone unfazed by life’s little disappointments.

“Are you coming to see us ?” she asked. “I’m just a half-hour train ride from Manhattan, on the PATH train.”

“I can’t,” he said. “I have to go back to LA soon as I can. It’s tax time and I’m very busy. I have about 350 clients now - maybe more.”

“It’s up to you,” said Alma, her voice laced with dismay. Efren, four years older than Alma, never visited her on the East Coast, always making excuses such as family obligations and money. After his wife had died and their two grown daughters had left home and he could afford to travel to the Philippines several times a year, those excuses seemed hollow. But Alma and her husband, Brett, an engineer at Bell Labs, and their two young sons, would visit Efren just to stay connected.

“It’s good to know you gave up restoring bathtubs; that was back-breaking,” she said, somewhat appeased.

“It paid very well, that’s why I got into it, but it was a real killer. I won’t do it again.” He had suspected that the job the tumor on his forehead that had to be excised, and the cancer that killed his wife, Nedda, even though his doctors said that was extremely difficult to prove.

Unlike his siblings – four including Alma -- Efren did not finish college or work at a profession. It was on this account that Alma, a physics professor at Hunter College, treated him with forbearance. Artistically inclined, her brother was good at drawing and had yearned to be an architect, but skipped college when he contracted tuberculosis. By the time he regained his health, their father, an airline manager, had passed away. Their mother and siblings left the country and made a life in the United States. Left behind, the recipient of an occasional *balikbayan* box filled with American goods and, on holidays, money transfers from his Stateside family, Efren decided he should also immigrate. He was convinced he could make a good living in America even with only a high school education, because he was not afraid to try his hand at any gainful trade. He had heard of auto mechanics and bus drivers in America making fifty to eighty grand a year.

Alma was his only sibling willing to go through the trouble of sponsoring him for a visa to America. “Just don’t get married yet,” she told him. “Siblings can only sponsor unmarried brothers or sisters.” Efren at the time had a girl friend, Nedda, who was only 16; Efren was 25. Her parents disapproved of the match, but they consented after Efren told them of his prospects of immigrating to America.

“Are you sure you can’t come see us?” Alma asked, almost pleading. “Emmett’s in college now, and Eric is finishing high school. I’m afraid your nephews won’t remember you anymore.”

“Say ‘hi’ to the boys and to Brett for me; I really have to go now.”

“We’re here in case you change your mind. Just call. And oh, good luck with your date,” she said, as his cell-phone went off.

Though he had nothing but love and respect for his successful sister, Efren would rather keep his distance. When would it end, he wondered -- her unceasing solicitude toward him, still

regarding him as the helpless, futureless drifter he once had been. *A waste of your money and time, be careful hooking up with strangers* -- at 53, he didn't want her advice or warning. He was trying to find the right woman, to find love again, and to keep this quest a private matter.

He owed her his life in America. Sponsoring him for a green card was no easy task, that much he acknowledged. Immigration officials would frown on his modest education, health history, and some hoary police record dating back to his teenaged years when he set off firecrackers at a gathering, injuring himself and others. Alma had to hire an immigration lawyer who managed to smooth out the kinks on his application forms. She also posted several thousand dollars in some kind of bond because INS wanted to make sure he wouldn't be a ward of the state.

When his resident permit had finally been approved, Efren married Nedda. It was Alma who cobbled up the money for their plane fares to the US, then lent them money for the down payment for their starter house, borrowing from a credit union and hiding the fact from her husband, for she knew he would have objected. "You've been bending over backward to help your brother; I think the rest of your family should chip in," Brett had told her once. But Alma ignored him, believing she had a right to spend some of her money the way she wanted, and Brett didn't force the issue. There were other gestures of beneficence from his younger sister, and Efren's sense of indebtedness to her weighed him down. He did not feel he needed anything more from her or from anybody. It also pained him that he could never repay her, although Alma did not expect to be repaid.

"What is family for if they won't help each other when needed?" she often reminded him. "I feel lucky to be able to help instead of being helped, if you know what I mean." She had been the super-achiever in the family – a Fulbright scholar, hard driving and hard working, the first of

the siblings to have an American Ph.D. She and her family lived in a four-bedroom suburban home and their sons went to an expensive private school.

That night, Alma told her family that her brother was in New York that week. “On business,” she had to add, “so he doesn’t have the time to visit us.” Brett nodded dully. Eric looked up from his plate of spaghetti and blurted: “Who’s F-train?” He grinned, half-embarrassed. His teeth were flecked with tomato sauce.

“It’s Efren, your uncle from LA,” their mother said. “He’s on some business,” she said pointedly, as she set her spoon and fork on her plate and finished eating. She took the dirty dishes to the sink, opened the faucet wide and let the water splash noisily.

It was easier for her to fib that way than to tell her family the truth - that Efren was in New York to meet a woman, a stranger. They knew of Efren’s penchant for changing jobs and getting into all kinds of money-making ventures-- wedding photography, carpet cleaning, managing a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise, buying and selling at a swap meet, not to mention the myriad occupations he had back home where he tried commercial fishing, hotel work, and running a numbers game. But always doing photography on the side, which never really paid well. One venture was abandoned for another after taking a toll on his health: a herniated disc from the carpet-cleaning business; clogged arteries from eating too much fried chicken; severe allergies from handling second-hand clothing and other items he sold at the flea market.

And so on. His wife Nedda wished he would settle on a ‘clean’ occupation, as she put it, the way she had stayed as an insurance claims adjuster for State Farm Insurance for nearly 20 years, starting as a receptionist and working up to a branch manager.

“How would I find out what would work if I didn’t try one after another?” Efren had argued.

**The claw-footed bathtub business** settled the issue. It was arduous; the tubs were heavy and

clunky. He worked out of the tiny backyard of their apartment complex, using a decommissioned swimming pool to store the tubs in. The building reeked of chemical fumes and buzzed with noise from the power tools, but the tenants, mostly illegals speaking meager English, were loath to complain.

When a complaint came, some months after Efren started the business, it was from Nedda, who contracted abdominal pains and began losing weight. By then Efren had refurbished about a dozen bathtubs he had bought for practically nothing, re-selling them for as high as 10 to 15 grand each to well-heeled customers in Beverly Hills and Santa Monica. A few months after Nedda fell ill, he himself experienced excruciating headaches. Nedda was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died in a matter of months. Efren and his daughters were devastated. The elder one, then pregnant, broke off with her boyfriend; the younger girl, Kaitlyn, went to work at the mall and lived with friends, returning home only after Efren had stabilized his life and wanted her back with him. Not long after Nedda had died, he felt a bump, the size of a golf ball, on his forehead, just below the hairline. He thought he had been stung by one of the yellow jackets that nested in a jacaranda tree in front of their apartment building. He took antihistamine and applied calamine lotion to the bump, but it didn't subside. It turned out to be a malignant tumor. Efren searched the Internet for surgeons in California who had treated the kind of tumor he had. He found one in San Diego who gave him a 30 percent chance of surviving the surgery, which involved sawing the front of his skull open and removing all trace of the growth. Even so, he was warned the tumor could return.

“You got very lucky” Dr. Cuevas told him, as Efren recovered. The surgeon would not speculate on the cause of the growth, but Efren blamed the strong solvents and acrylic finishes he used in the restoration work for their illnesses. At times he felt it was a case of divine retribution,

admitting to himself that all along he had been driven by pecuniary interests, anxious to prove he was as smart and financially successful as his other siblings.

A family friend introduced him to the tax preparation job. As a favor, Efren agreed to help him with his backlog. He found he was quite good at numbers and that the work wasn't difficult once he learned the rules and procedures. Soon he had his own clientele, working out of his now nearly empty home. He avoided complicated cases, limiting himself to 1040 forms for personal income. Most of his clients were Asian and Mexican immigrants who could talk to him in their native tongue -- Efren himself spoke Tagalog and a decent Spanish -- and who found Anglo tax preparers too loud, too impersonal, and charged too much money. His clients trusted Efren to get them a good refund or little tax liability and to charge them a decent fee. He reached out to low-income families, explaining the importance of filing tax returns every year.

It was then he saw some socially redeeming value in his new endeavor.

“When you apply for immigration or a mortgage, or borrow money for a business, you will need a tax return,” he told – almost preached to - them. “You will need it when you apply for student loans for your sons or daughters. I don't charge much -- \$20 minimum for a basic tax return. Of course, the more complicated your case – like if you have several sources of incomes – I have to work more and charge you a bit more, too. But all in all, *compadres y amigos*, it's a small price to pay for you and your family's future in America.” Some customers reciprocated with invitation to weddings, christenings, *quinceañeras*, picnics or dinners of homemade Mexican food, or with baskets of strawberries, mangoes and avocados.

**But all that** was not enough to fill the void in his heart. Widowed for seven years, he still could not see betraying Nedda's memory by taking another wife or lover. What also deterred him was his belief that love was fraught with danger. He was convinced he just got lucky with Nedda.

And even then, he felt Nedda broke his heart by dying before her time. But now, with both his daughters on their own, he could not bear going home to an empty house. He wanted to love again, find another Nedda, another petite, young Filipina with smooth pale skin and an almost childlike trust in him.

**He had come** to New York a day before the rendezvous to allow himself time to shake off his nervousness and feel composed. He did not want to be overwrought on this trip and make false steps. His default behavior when in a stressful situation was to stay cool and unruffled. “It is the mark of class and refinement,” his father had drilled into his children.

When his daughters were young he and his wife had taken them to visit New York. Now he was going to familiarize himself again with Manhattan, where he planned to take the girl from Queens. He was going to impress her as a man who knew his way around, who could be depended upon to guide her through the maze of the city and give her a good time. In short, Efren wanted to experience again the delights of courtship and romance, of falling in love.

It was his daughter Kaitlyn who had advised him to troll for *Pinays* on the Internet. That was after Efren returned from his last trip to the islands a few years ago. He had gone to his hometown in the Philippines to celebrate his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday with old friends; he had planned to stay a month.

Kaitlyn was surprised – and worried -- when he called her a week later to pick him up at the airport. He was unusually quiet and looked defeated but was otherwise in good health. During the ride home he told her how he had gone to a popular beach resort south of the capital where the sand was white and fine as sugar, and the sun – the color of pure gold -- blazed but did not scorch. “That place is very popular with German and Australian tourists,” he told Kaitlyn, who

was studying documentary filmmaking at UCLA. Told her how he met a woman-vendor, had bought from her a bottle of water, and that when she noticed his camera, she offered to take him to a special place where he could take beautiful pictures.

“I thought why not,” he continued. “She seemed so kind and all sweetness, a thin whip of a girl. I agreed to meet her the next morning, but before we parted she said I should come in a motorcycle, and not to forget to bring cash because the restaurants and stores there didn’t accept credit cards. And of course, she reminded me to bring my camera.”

“I get it, Dad,” Kaitlyn interrupted without taking her eyes off the road. “A guy--the boyfriend or husband -- is hiding behind a huge ugly *anahaw* tree. He and the girl jump you, grab your camera and cash and speed away on your motorcycle. So long, *amigo*. You’ll get the ransom note in no time – at your hotel. Cut to next scene.” She gave her father a quick look and laughed.

“I’m not dumb; I know a scam when I see one. I didn’t show up.”

“There’s been too many kidnappings over there – especially where you go. Dad, please, just go on the Internet.”

**He did.** At first, he contented himself with just viewing the girls’ photographs. He was loath to sign up and log in, supplying a lot of personal information including his age. To be sure, he wasn’t bad-looking for a man just past middle age. He was 5- foot-7, tall for an Asian. Since working from home he had put on much needed pounds which made him look younger and healthier. He dyed his thick hair black; a cowlick grazed his forehead hiding the scar from the surgery and lending him an easygoing, rascally look. He dressed tastefully in current styles, favoring neutral tones – khaki, beige and browns. His broad, rather craggy face, easy gait, and his large almond-shaped eyes had led some to allow that he bore a striking resemblance to Lee

Marvin in some of his tough guy roles. After spending hours gazing at the pictures Efren could no longer tell one girl from the other. All of them were young, almost adolescents, diminutive, and with smooth skin and heart-shaped faces. He read their profiles with much interest. Many listed music, cooking, travel (“willing to relocate anywhere”), movies, sightseeing, and, to his bafflement, religion, as main interests. Most wanted their men to be understanding, loving, kind, generous and to give them what they want, “not just love.” Efren believed he had most of those qualities and gained more confidence in himself.

Deciding he should be less picky, he shifted his search from the enticing faces and luscious bodies to websites touting ‘virginal’ girls from the far-flung provinces of the archipelago, some simply looking for pen-pals. He settled for a woman who looked older than most of the other girls. Her sepia-toned snapshots were disarmingly simple, numinous with her prim smile and long black hair that covered part of her thin face. He liked her name: Loida. It glided on his tongue like a lozenge. He didn’t bother to know her last name when he responded to her posting, as if that would dilute the loveliness of the first.

He allotted a week in New York to get acquainted with Loida and set in motion whatever relationship would develop. If it was promising, he could always come back, he thought, or else he could send for her to come to LA. Or else .... The possibilities seemed endless. Oddly, the idea that their rendezvous would go smoothly and lead to love frightened him, feeling that something so good should not come that easy.

He spent the day in Times Square, his Nikon camera with a zoom lens strapped across his shoulder, but found little he wanted to document. Sure, there were intriguing faces all around him – weirdly dressed men and women, wild-eyed, grizzled men, old women weighed down with shopping bags, pushing shopping carts; but Efren was not in the mood for engaging

strangers in a conversation. He had to stay alert. He remembered footage of September 11 on television showing people plummeting from the burning Twin Towers. Airborne, falling headlong to eternity, they already seemed non-human – wounded birds, discarded toys, downed kites. He wondered if, during the course of this visit in the city, he would stumble into something as haunting to photograph, and if he would have the presence of mind to aim his lens and shoot.

He decided he would take Loida to dine somewhere in Queens, near where she was rooming with some Filipino nurses. Manhattan was simply too complicated and exhausting for him.

**He and Loida** had once talked on the phone at length. She borrowed a cellphone from a friend when she needed it. What he remembered just now was the incident with a dog that Loida had cared for when she lived with an elderly couple in Astoria. In return, the couple, who were well-off, provided her free board and lodging. Loida told him she liked her job, especially because it took her outside when she walked the dog, a 3-year-old golden retriever named Judge, and she got to meet other Filipinas – mostly nurses working at various hospitals in Queens and Manhattan. She had been a teacher back in her hometown and now in America she had what her friends saw as a cushy job, sauntering up and down sidewalks and parks with the golden retriever and chatting with other dog-walkers, looking like a woman of leisure, and possibly getting a salary ten times what she earned back home. In America, she said, she was just domestic help and was not free; just getting Sundays off was a fight with her employer.

After her visa expired she lost her legal status. Without a social security number, she could not open a bank account, get a credit card, travel anywhere where an ID was required, nor apply for a job. Her employer –the woman’s name was Danica -- began to treat her harshly, forbidding

her from consorting with her friends. True, she grew to love the dog, her only source of warmth and affection, but she felt trapped and helpless. Only 33, she wanted to work and earn again, perhaps earn an American degree, but without a resident visa she could not do any of those things.

She told Efren how one Saturday she stole out of the apartment to have a night out with her friends in Elmhurst. She wanted to stay on good terms with the only friends she had. Loida left Judge in the care of the household cook who had taken pity on her for her prison-like existence. When she returned home she found the door locked from inside. She called for the dog but there was no response. She sat all night on the couch in the building's lobby unable to sleep, thinking of the dog and his warm breath, his silken coat and licks on her face when she was having nightmares. The next day, Danica, a wraithlike woman with silver hair, hobbled down to the lobby clad in a bathrobe. A large rectangular cardboard box— one that had been used for packaging, torn brown tape and address label still attached – sat under the coffee table. “That’s for you,” she told Loida pointing at the box. Loida tried to lift the box. It was quite heavy, and she muttered ‘thank you,’ thinking it was some kind of present for her, or some belongings she had left behind. When she opened it there was Judge lying stiff on his side on a bed of crumpled newspapers.

“I blacked out from the shock,” she told Efren. “I don’t remember how long I was there and what I did.” Danica told her that the dog had slipped out of the house unattended and was run over by a car. Loida hailed a cab and brought the dog to its veterinarian, a 15-minute ride away. The vet told her the animal had been poisoned. She paid the vet for the dog’s burial and left, grief-stricken. “It was like losing a child,” she told Efren.

Loida took her meager belongings and went to room with three of her friends in a duplex in Elmhurst. All she needed was a green card, her friends kept telling her, as if Loida didn't know this. Her roommates helped her post on a dating website, where Efren had found her. She didn't want new photos taken for the site, so she used old snapshots she had with her.

“Bad enough they killed the animal; it was heartless of her to show you his dead body,” Efren had said after the phone conversation. He felt badly for her and wished he could help her. On the phone, which she said was now low on battery, Loida assured him that she was okay, and that as long nobody turned her in, she could avoid deportation indefinitely.

**He walked back** to Times Square. At a Chinese restaurant he ordered a bowl of wonton soup and a plate of vegetable stir fry, ate lightly, and headed back to his hotel. In his room he dialed Loida's number, which she had given him with instructions to call her at that appointed time because she had to return the phone to her friend. “I'm glad you arrived safely, Sir. Welcome to New York.” Her voice, soft and expectant, gave Efren a start.

“Why are you ‘sir-ring’ me. Just call me Efren. I know I'm older than you, but I hope not by much.” He did not know how old Loida was – he guessed she was in her late 30's. But he did not deny *Pinays* looked younger than their age. He asked her if she knew a place she would like to dine in and she quickly mentioned *Krystal Hut* and its address in Woodside. “They have excellent Filipino food, and not too expensive,” she said, adding that her roommates patronized it because it made them feel like being back home.

**Exhaustion** caught up with him; he lay in bed and dreamed as soon as he fell asleep. He dreamed he was driving in heavy traffic up a steep road when a network of open highways

loomed ahead. He did not know which way to go. He tried to brake but his car skated backward and struck the car behind him. There was a loud cry but it was muffled by the noise of the crash. Shaking violently, Efren's car righted itself. As Efren pressed on the brakes, his head slammed against the headrest, waking him up. The next day, he awoke with a throbbing head. He took a long shower, and shaved. He took his time dressing, putting on a light-green Lacoste polo and dark-blue chinos, and buffed his pair of beige loafers with the shoe-shine kit he found in the room's closet, next to the ironing board.

**A brisk wind blew**, churning up street litter and puffing up people's clothing. Awnings over the sidewalk stalls flapped noisily. It had been a dry, gusty Spring in New York. Dirt pelted his face and he shielded it with his hand even as he tried mightily to press the hank of cowlick down on his forehead. Not certain where to exit, he followed the crowd out of the station down two flights of metal-clad wooden stairs. At the landing a neon red- and-green luminescent arrow pointed to *Krystal Hut*, a restaurant across the street. He joined the clot of pedestrians waiting for the light to turn green, even as jaywalkers dashed between cars. Efren was suddenly aware of his backpack containing his camera and guide books and he hitched it up tight against his body. He was pleased to have readily found the restaurant, an auspicious start, he thought. A smile played on his face as he pushed the glass door and stepped inside. A long counter contained plastic replicas of familiar Filipino dishes – barbecued chicken, pork adobo, fried lumpia , and an assortment of pastries and rolls glowing under fluorescent lights. The dark wooden floor was scuffed in places; the bare tables were of thin dark brown laminate, some square, a few against the wall, rectangular. At the far end of the room, a portable screen separated a dark section but there were no booths, as Efren had hoped. He and Loida would need some privacy.

“*Kamusta, pare,*” a waiter greeted him cheerfully and immediately showed him a table near the window; it was seven o’clock, still light outside; there were only a few diners. Relieved at having left the raucous outdoors, Efren eased into the rattan-framed chair with a dark-brown vinyl seat that sagged in the center. He placed his backpack on the other chair by his side and tried to compose himself amid the familiar restaurant clatter of plates, workers’ chatter, bursts of laughter, and cacophony of voices. On the television on the wall, a Filipino soap opera was playing, its heroine weeping and the befuddled hero watching her with doleful eyes. Across from his table, behind the buffet counter, the wall was plastered with color photographs of the restaurant’s dishes and snapshots of groups of diners. On another wall was a mural of a jeepney studded with rhinestones. Elsewhere were unframed prints of rural Philippines: bamboo dancers, water buffaloes plodding on rice paddies, women winnowing rice, children hawking tropical fruits. When he was ready to call for a glass of beer, an El train boomed and rattled overhead, like a rabid monster, shaking him to the bones. Long after the train had rumbled away, and a waiter approached, Efren continued to feel his body vibrate.

He told the waiter he was waiting for a friend and ordered San Miguel beer.

“You don’t mind my waiting here?”

“No problem, Sir,” a diminutive Filipino waiter with dark glossy hair said, as he wiped the bare Formica table with a damp cloth. “We don’t rush our customers, especially our own *kababayan*. We are family here.” They broke into laughter and waiter returned to the kitchen. Upstairs a karaoke was going full blast, a young man was singing: *Feelings, wo-o-o feelings, wo-o-o feelings again in my arms*. Efren sipped his drink, humming along to himself. It had been one of the songs he and Nedda danced to on their first date. He was glad to be there that night, not at his hotel room or with his sister in Hoboken and her boring American husband and their

boisterous sons.

**The wind died down** as the evening settled. Someone pressed the door open for fresh air but warm and and rancid odor from the fruit stands and food carts seeped in. The restaurant began filling up with diners – mostly Filipinos. They were noisy, chattering in Tagalog, shouting to be heard over the racket, bantering and laughing wildly at each other’s jokes.

More guests arrived – Filipino young couples, some with their Caucasian friends in tow, whole families with grandparents, mothers and fathers with infants and toddlers in strollers, causing a mad rush to fetch kiddie chairs. But Loida was nowhere. Efren drank his beer slowly, savoring every sip. An hour, two, three went by; he was feeling nervous but the beer calmed him down. A waiter wearing a transparent plastic apron torn in places came by, sympathy written on his eager brown face.

“In New York, it’s hard to be on time, Sir. The trains are often late,” he consoled Efren. “And oh, accidents – always something going wrong, Sir.” He laughed heartily and spritzed his face with beer as he popped another bottle open.

“Nice place,” Efren said, trying to make small talk and ignoring the sprays of beer froth on his own face. “*Masarap ba*, is the food good?”

“Oh, Sir, genuine Filipino style. You can even eat with your fingers – we give you a hot towel.” Efren laughed. He asked about the dollar bills plastered on the wall to his right. “Fake money, Sir, a lot of counterfeits from some of our customers. Nothing we can do after they’ve left – they leave no trace, so we have to familiarize ourselves with what fake looks like. I can spot a fake dollar from a mile away; it’s here in my *cocote*, ” he said, tapping his head. “Like a photograph.” Efren wondered if the felon who paid with these fake bills was a Filipino. “Why

would someone do it to a *kababayan*?”

“Oh, Sir, there are no saints here; once they are in the big city, they get very desperate.” Efren learned that the waiter’s name was Chito.

“Please, no need to ‘sir’ me. It’s Efren.”

The waiter nodded gratefully.

He sat back listening to the music wafting down from upstairs. “*Feelings, feelings like I’ve never lost you. Again in my heart. Feelings, wo-o-o feelings....*” this time a woman was singing. It must be the restaurant’s theme song, or its owner’s favorite, Efren surmised.

He was now famished and woozy from the beer taken on an empty stomach. On purpose he had skipped lunch, reserving his appetite for dinner. He strummed at his shirt, his way of relieving his uneasiness. The prospect of being stood up by a date he had crossed the continent for grated on him, and he regretted being in a place where he was fodder for gossip and ridicule from nosy compatriots, who were now surreptitiously watching him. He shifted in his chair and smiled wanly at them.

“*Kamusta? Mabuti? Good? Okay lang?*” a girl asked him; her friends giggled, waiting for him to reply. Oddly, he warmed to their greetings.

“*Okay lang, trying to relax,*” he said.

His stomach twitched when he caught a whiff of the familiar Filipino dishes redolent with fish sauce, garlic, vinegar and cilantro. He read the menu again, a rather large booklet stained with soy sauce, sheathed in yellowing plastic. Its edges sticky with bits of cooked rice. He ran his eyes down the list of dishes and right away knew what he wanted - two appetizers, a noodle dish, the chicken-pork adobo, stewed vegetables, and a whole steamed fish. He would eat what he craved and drink more beer, and enjoy the evening.

“Oh, very good,” he said, his eyes gleaming with delight, when the appetizers arrived – fried *chicharones* (pork rind) his favorite chaser, and fried smelts. He told the waitress to hold off the rest of the orders until his friend arrived. Loida had no cellphoneno of her own, he remembered, so he could not call her. Maybe he should finish dinner, pay, and leave. Or salvage the evening by going into the bar across the street. He didn’t know what to do. Mindlessly, he popped morsels of the *chicharones* into his mouth, making little crunchy noises. He stared at the bowl of steamed rice and other dishes; he was no longer hungry.

**It was almost midnight** when Loida showed up, breathless, looking harried, her long hair disheveled, calling out his name as she scanned the room full of diners.

“Loida?” Efren asked as he rose to greet her and she offered her hand in greeting. He guided her to his table, his eyes peeled on her face. She was ineffably lovely, he thought, and if she looked bedraggled he ascribed it to the strain of trying to get to the restaurant and being late. She wore an ankle-length skirt of soft cotton, almost silk-like, which billowed as she moved. Everything will be all right, he told himself. He was too suffused with happiness to listen to her apologies – something about lost keys and her confusion over the subway lines.

The restaurant began to empty. Chito approached them, trying to be as unobtrusive and polite as he could. The downstairs dining area was now going to be cleaned, he whispered to Efren. Chito said they could use the upper floor, which was usually reserved for big parties. He offered to bring the remaining food upstairs for Loida. “I can heat it for her,” he added, and went into the kitchen with the food.

Efren hitched his backpack over his shoulders and with his free hand lightly around her waist,

they went upstairs. The karaoke music had stopped. They sat at one end of a long table covered with an embroidered tablecloth. Around it were a dozen chairs, all newish with real leather trim. In the center was a crystal vase filled with wilting daffodils, tulips, hyacinths and a sprinkling of baby's breath and airy green leaves – left behind perhaps from a banquet. Overhead, a crystal chandelier shaped like a hut dangled unlit. A pair of wall sconces made of mother-of-pearl cast a pale light across the room.

“Sorry, Sir, so sorry,” Loida was saying, raking her long, dank hair and trying to keep it off her thin face. Her eyes were beautiful, Efren thought. They seemed to dance and gleam in the soft light as she spoke, barely raising her face up to him.

“Please don't 'sir' me. It's Efren,” he said. She looked at him shyly and nodded.

Chito brought her a new set of Melmac plates, spoons and forks wrapped in a thin paper napkin. Then the trays of warmed-up food. Efren eased back in his seat and urged her to start eating. “You must be hungry.”

“No, really, Sir. I'm more tired than hungry. It's my fault – I have not learned to take the subway; I always get confused –uptown, downtown, and all those numbers and letters. She was breathing deeply and Efren could see the top of her breasts – pale and full - heaving beneath her thin, white blouse.

“Don't worry, I'm just so thankful you made it,” Efren said. Emboldened by her abject display of remorse he draped an arm around her shoulder. “I thought something bad happened. I started to worry.” He pressed her closer to his side as if to comfort her. She did not recoil. Already, Efren felt she was as he saw her on the dating website - a simple, warm-hearted soul -- if at this moment a bit frazzled. He thought he would be gentle and considerate with her, soothe her nerves and make her trust him.

Suddenly he broke away from her, startled. “*Dios mio*, they are closing, we should really leave.” He did not know where to take Loida; what about all that food for her?

“Chito?” he called out to ask for the check.

But Chito had left. A woman came out of the kitchen and told Efren they could leave whenever they wanted because workers would be up all night. Discreetly, she placed the check under one of the plates, and Efren took it and paid her.

“Oh, *salamat*, thank you so very much,” Efren said. “Sorry, she came very late,” he added, turning to Loida. “She’ll have something to eat and then we’ll go.” Loida eyed the cold food and picked on the chicken adobo, using her fingers, and swallowed a spoonful of the sour fish soup. Then she sat back and said she was hungry but that she probably would want to eat more later.

**The kitchen door** closed. In the now quiet reception room Efren did not know how to start their conversation. There was so much to know about her; at the same time he did not want to know everything about her on their first date. He looked forward to knowing her gradually, in a non-contrived manner, and discovering each other like a book, page by page.

“I still think your employers were wrong to show you the dead dog,” Efren said, and right away regretted bringing up such a sordid subject. “It’s hard to erase that kind of thing from your memory,” he added, as if that would dilute the sting of his words.

“The cruelty, Sir, more than the dog,” Loida said, flinging her hair back as she raised her face to his.

“What, wh-what did they do to you?” Efren, unnerved, asked in a raised voice. He had been staring at the marks on her arms, which he noticed when she had to reach for the glass of water, or raise the fork to her mouth, pretending to eat. The scars were long, some were raw. Some

looked like lashes; on her upper right arm were rashes, as if caused by brushing against a rose bush. He noticed dark scabs, from burns, perhaps. He fought the urge to seize her arms and lay them on the table for his scrutiny.

She withdrew her arms and kept them at her sides. “Sir, Efren,” she said in pleading voice, facing him. “You understand my situation?” she asked.

He nodded; she was an illegal in a big city. Penniless, alone, vulnerable, maltreated, and too frightened to complain or file a police report. He had known of and read about sadistic employers preying on powerless domestic help.

“What I mean is – I need your help,” Loida said, her voice urgent but hollow, as though she was talking into a microphone. “If you marry me you can sponsor me for a green card as a dependent spouse. I will borrow the money for a lawyer who will do the paperwork, and to pay you. We don’t have to live together.” She looked straight up at him, then tilted her face to the side anticipating his response.

Efren’s face darkened; his eyes blinked wildly and reached up to feel the scar. It throbbed. His dreams of courting a woman, romancing her and falling in love were crushed. Now, it was just a transaction she was proposing. Kaitlyn, his film-making daughter, would have caught the ploy straightaway: Loida, for all he knew was a married woman, a husband and children waiting back home for her to return as bona fide US resident, able to claim them and bring them over to America. Despite the pitfalls of such arrangements, many still took the risk, Efren knew that.

“Sir,” she pleaded, her hands clasped between her knees. “You will be paid - the lawyer will take care of all the papers and make sure you get paid.”

“Stop it,” Efren exclaimed, no longer caring whether someone heard him or not. He raised his hand and felt for the scar on his forehead. He thought his head would burst. “I don’t want your

money,” he said sternly. He moved away from her, slowly, calmly, for he remembered his father’s advice never to lose his composure. He moved his chair and rested it flushed against the wall; he needed some distance from her.

“No, Loida, I’m not who you think I am. I refuse to be bought. I came here in good faith....” He couldn’t go on; he felt demeaned, trampled upon by this needy, shameless stranger, trying to net him into a pecuniary deal.

Loida pulled her chair closer to him and away from the table, so that now, facing Efren, she looked like a bride who had turned to her guests for the garter-tossing scene. Methodically she unbuttoned her blouse and spread apart the fly front, exposing her bare breasts, which quivered and glowed in the dim light. Efren trembled; he felt heat surge up his body, his face and head. He started to perspire and tried to look away from her.

“Look, all this is yours if you marry me,” he heard her say, unabashed. He looked. She had raised her skirt up to her thighs and leaned back to spread them apart. She had no underwear.

“*Gratis.*” She rocked her body rhythmically, as if mocking him.

“Loida, please stop that,” Efren commanded her. “If I want sex, I am free to get it - anytime, anywhere.” He recalled his own words to his sister Alma: what if it doesn’t pan out?

“I’m sorry, Sir; you didn’t expect this, but I’m asking for your help. You seem to be a kind, understanding man, that’s why I agreed to meet you.”

“Have you asked other men before?”

“I could have, but it’s a dangerous, you can not trust just any man.”

“What makes you think you can trust me?”

“Sir, I just feel it, here inside, I can’t tell you what it is,” she said, poking a finger on her cleavage.

He did not know what to say. He knew many immigrants resort to fake marriages just to get a green card, but he wasn't after money and he knew the penalties for dealings – a quarter million dollar fine and several years in prison, and possibly loss of his US citizenship.

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry, I have to refuse you.”

Loida buttoned her blouse, straightened her skirt, and sat up straight on her chair; she placed her arms on the table exposing the scratches, scars and scabs on them.

“You are a cruel man,” she declared. “You have something I need badly but you refuse me.”

There was such bitterness and hardness in her voice that Efren feared she would make a scene. How would he handle a woman's assault? He had never been called cruel by anyone. And yet Loida was asking for his help as if she were a drowning woman. He couldn't believe he was capable of being cruel to another human being – of poisoning someone's beloved pet, letting someone drown, killing for ransom. He took his backpack, which felt heavier than it had been, and told her was going downstairs to the men's room and would be back.

Downstairs the restaurant's doorman held the door open for Efren, saying “Goodnight, Sir,” quickly correcting himself because it was now morning. “Morning, excuse, me sir.” Efren handed him a ten dollar bill. The doorman thanked him beneath his breath and mumbled: “Be careful, Sir, crossing; there are drunk drivers this time of day.”

Outside, neon signs and marquees flashed and flickered but the streets seemed to Efren to be swathed in darkness, a thick, dirty blackness like soot. The arrow sign to *Krystal Hut* seemed to flash brighter and faster. He crossed the avenue and stood under the tracks across the street behind one of the pillars. He saw the door-man come out – the man he had tipped generously - and hold the door open. Loida emerged, agitated, raking her loosened hair back, her eyes searching the streets. Efren knew she was looking for him. He saw her pause, looking up at the

elevated tracks, her face under the glare of the restaurant's neon sign, the rest of her in darkness. Instinctively Efren took his camera out of his backpack and switched it on. He kept taking pictures of her as she ran toward the street corner away from where he stood until he lost her image in a swirl of billowing cloth. A car horn shrieked and brakes squealed.

On the train with him were a few passengers who had seen the accident and were nervously talking about it.

"Poor woman, I hope they save her," said a heavy-set, dark woman who wore a stained blue apron. "She was tottering like a drunk. I didn't know whether she was going to cross or not, her arms all over. She wasn't watching the cars, she just ran out without looking," a man with a thick Hispanic accent who sat across from Efren, said. The man looked around him hoping someone would understand what he was talking about and that he was not just some mumbling lunatic. For a long time he watched Efren, who was fiddling with his camera, erasing the last pictures ever taken of Loida.

As soon as he returned to his hotel, he retrieved his belongings and checked out. "Hoboken, please. See if you can take a short cut," he told the cab, for he wanted to get to his sister's place as soon as he could. It was almost daylight. Soon they would be driving against the fierce rays of sun. Alma would be awake by now. It dawned on him he couldn't just fly back to LA without seeing her, her husband, and his nephews. He could not wound her feelings more than he already had.