Patterns

When Mother and I pushed the boxes deeper into the back of the truck, a neighbor asked if we were leaving that apartment, the one that looked down on the road, with its second floor roof as pointed and quiet and still as that of a church's. Mother said yes as I carried more boxes piled up on the sidewalk into the truck. Neighborly small talk was rare for us, and Mother wiped her hands on her flowery shapeless duster's sides and chatted, with a wrinkled old man with sideburns, taking a break from moving the contents of our lives into yet another anonymous vehicle. We were used to this – all this packing, moving, resettling, moving again. But this house, I never wanted to leave this house; this two-floored oddly placed dwelling on the elbow of nowhere.

But I couldn't tell Mother that.

Out of a small pocket indistinguishable from the flower patterns of her duster, Mother pulled a small white towel – this, without skipping a beat in the good-natured small talk – and wiped the glisten of sweat on her face. She would be in the office most of the time, she told the old man. There would be no one to look after the two boys, since the eldest was always at school or busy with schoolwork at home. That's why we're moving back in with my mother. The old man nodded. Ah, yes, I sighed. The estranged-eldest-son-and-busy-working-mom story. It was the first time I heard it, but it sounded as though Mother had it prepared. Practiced.

The sun above the pointed roof of our apartment's second floor seemed to stand still, as I did, leaning on a tier of boxes beside the truck. It has been a long time since I heard Mother talk like that, with her shoulders laughing along with her. Confide in strangers. Easier that way.

The stranger, like the noontime sun, eventually moved on, and Mother and I were back to the empty road that stretched before us, and the church behind us. Catching her breath, Mother pushed the small of her back with her left hand as she grimaced, straightening her posture; her other hand wiping the beads of sweat on her forehead. Her eyebrows had a way of letting the sweat roll down and into her eyes, so that, every time she lifted something heavy, she looked as though she had been crying.

I would discover, years later, while moving the contents of a life I would share with Anne, that I had inherited the same bad back.

Mother locked the door, hid the keys under a potted plant, and padlocked the front gate. The apartment owner would be here before nightfall.

I pulled the ropes binding several boxes tighter, and then waved, from behind the truck, at the driver's side mirror. The bearded man lifted his squinting eyes from a folded newspaper, and soon I heard the engine come to life.

Mother stared at me from the gate. Later, she would lean on the truck for support. On the trip to Grandma's, where we were headed, Mother and I would not talk. Not even after we had unloaded the boxes that evening, except for what to have for dinner.

We got into the seat beside the driver. I felt Mother, beside me, staring at me staring at the side mirror that framed my sanctuary. That mirror, the house behind us, the road ahead.

A small pocket calendar taped above the truck's rearview mirror said 1997. The arching entrance to our recluse subdivision read, as we passed under it: You are now leaving Suarezville.

I had been Mother's perpetual tag-along every time she moved out of her mother's house, and then came back in, and left again, over and over, since grade school. And up until grade four, home was really Grandma's. There is something about big high-ceilinged houses and the rhythms of a large family that a ten year old lived for.

We had lost all our photo albums to the floods, but I remember every detail clearly. Grandma's dining room flowed into a receiving area that turned left into an elevation large enough for three color-coded bedrooms – pink (my aunts'), blue (my uncles'), and yellow (my grandparents'). Mom shared the pink room with her sisters. I slept, back then an only grandchild, in any room I wanted to.

I would wake up grunting and a squinting, suddenly resentful of the blaze of sunlight flooding the room when Grandma swished the bedroom curtains aside, but not of the scent of breakfast that must have trailed her from the kitchen. But even after the heel of my palms had rubbed the grogginess away, I would always find myself, not in the kitchen, but in the sala, where old Narra furniture was a sight as fixed as Grandpa's

Hispanic image of a man with strong fists, of few words, and who had owned no one anything his entire life. His rocking chair seemed to slowly arc back and forth even when he was not there. Each morning, he would go through the folded broadsheets and tabloids, giving each opened newspaper a good shake, as if to allow the sour headlines to settle. Then he would emit the early signs of a frown, which I carefully measured – a squint with a sneer meant I would get a rolled-up-newspaper beating if I tried to sneak the funnies away. Grandpa's coffee cup, which he never spilled, always matched the design of the saucer and even that of the handle of the tiny spoon that it came with – a foible I immediately took after: even now I am uneased by the sight of mismatching spoons and forks and cups and saucers. As Grandpa blinked at the headlines, which he had taught me read at four years old, the hoarse voice of radio commentators boomed from a small transistor radio beside him.

This was how I framed my mornings up until grade four. Grandpa idle but grunting on his rocking chair, the headlines before his eyes another sore one, the slanting morning sun lighting Grandpa's thin, pale feet half in and half out of his alfombra. His rocking chair a pendulum in an otherwise still life. The scent of coffee blending with that of Grandma's garden, just beside the sala; freshly watered greens whose names I kept forgetting, the smell of newly watered soil reminding me of that morning's insulation – standing on the coffee table, I could see the service road from afar, my grade school building after that, and the rest of the world this morning would open up to if only I ventured out. But at that moment, they were all but distant tiny murmurs.

Tinamaang lintik! Sinabing huwag umakyat sa lamesa. Baba!

Opo, opo, opo.

I would leave Grandpa to his rocking chair and run to the dining area, past the receiving room, where Mother, by then, would be sipping her own cup of coffee; she still slightly sleepy though already devouring the sinangag and tuyo and kamatis on an old plate with flower patterns at the center, the same patterns on my favorite blankets, the kind you could get on any market – the same ones on the thermos and blankets I would buy when Anne and I started living together. As Mother ate, Grandma ironed her children's uniforms near the dining table, while relaying a calmer version of family-gossip my Grandaunt told Grandma the day before. Across Mother an aunt would be staring at nothing, saying nothing, and hearing nothing: still waiting for her kokote to bubble up to the surface and acknowledge daybreak. Then an uncle, just out of the blue room, would stifle a loud yawn, raise one hand and arc his entire body, his other hand scratching his revealed stomach – those old holey shirts looking enviously more comfortable than my Spiderman pajamas. Then he would survey the breakfast course while dragging his feet to the bathroom. His kokote would firm up half way through his first cup of coffee, which I would fix for him, and then for the next uncle to stifle a yawn.

That long rectangular dining table, where we had breakfast, lunch, dinner, merienda, where my uncles did their homework, where aunts and grandaunts traded gossip, where my cousins and I hung out during brownouts - defined the house and, for me, the élan of the clan: that table kept us together.

Coming out of Mother's room, and late again for my class in the school just across the street, I could navigate, with my eyes closed, exactly where I was. Three steps down a short flight of stairs and I would be in the receiving room, where I would have to cover my eyes even I had them shut: bright sunlight from eight windows would flood the house, but Mother's always-matching near-ceiling-to-floor curtains always muffled the morning blaze - unless Grandpa wanted more light in the house again, so I covered my eyes anyway. If I kept walking, I would run right into the crouch, and if I turned right, Mother or her mother would yell at me to stop else I run straight into the ironing board, which often smelled of heated banana leaves, probably fleshly plucked from the bakuran in the next looban. While I rubbed my eyes, Grandma would tell me to sit and eat while she irons. My uniform, as usual, would be pressed before anyone else's, but I would be late for school anyway.

Mother would be done eating by then and would point my kokote to my breakfast; the scent of hot pandesal and peanut butter strong in my nose and the sun, this time from the open kitchen door, even stronger in my eyes. Mother would rise to wash her hands, and bring her coffee cup to the pink room while she dressed for work, having already taken a shower ahead of everyone else. The open kitchen door always gave me a framed view of Grandma's plants – hung from hooks, nailed on the wall, potted, or being chewed up by a neighbor's dog - and of the aratiles and kamias trees shading the pathway. That's why Grandma's sinigang is by default na kamias whenever she forgot to buy ingredients. But I had no complaints. Mornings in that house meant you could tell where you were by the scent of served meals, the shade of

something green, the strength of seeping sunlight, the sounds of Grandpa's grunts and Grandma's second hand gossip. It would last, like all good things, as long as it could.

So that my uncles and aunts would not kill each other every morning and be late for school or work, Grandma's had two bathrooms. Between them was a small pathway that led into the open-air laundry area. I would stick my head out that passageway just to see the large shadow of the water tank that towered over our house, and to gaze at the entire length of another pathway that ran the length of the house, at the end of which our large wet blankets and curtains weighed down on clotheslines until the wind and sun dried them up in the afternoon. I would look up the gray metal pillars of the water tank, which we were to paint and repaint over the years, until time came when keeping the structure was a maintenance battle: the core structural strength had rusted away. But the clotheslines, the fresh air running through the entire high-ceilinged house with windows everywhere, the constant shade of the trees, they were always there.

This was how I measured my mornings. With a tour of the house.

Around the long dining table, Grandmother's three sons and three daughters would sit and gather for lunch, and leave, afternoon-drowsy, an hour later. For people who met every single day of the week, whose debates and fights could be heard by anyone passing through our end of the looban, the dual climax of family life was lunch and dinner - a ritual of long conversations over Grandma's cooking – the most savored of which were sinigang na baboy or isda or hipon sa bayabas or buko or pakwan or kamias - and large servings of rice and these episodes would last until the sons and

daughters married and moved away, or married and stayed home, but moved away still.

Every time an aunt or uncle brought home a future spouse, I could see in my mind one end of the long table being sawed off. An extended family entailed adding furniture, an "expanded" house, a larger bathroom, more clotheslines, a bigger aparador to house the dishes - and all these were done - but the changes had the singular effect of cramming the dining room with furniture, and of having the dining table shortened, instead of lengthened, to accommodate the new members who should have taken part in the long and silly talks come lunch and dinner, debates and stories about Marcos, how Grandma survived during the Second World War, the US bases, Eat Bulaga, Grandpa's angst about the government, a list that never ends because it's been the same list every since. Short, large-eyed, and barely able to reach the main course at the center of the table, I sat and ate quietly, giggling at the animated exchange, happily ignored, melting with the large-numbered calendar behind me and the God Bless Our Home framed way over my head.

The more sons and daughters married, the more time Grandpa spent outside, with his newspapers and transistor radio; the more lunches and dinners became silent and obligatory; the less enthusiastic Grandma felt about cooking for our small clan. I was thinking that if this trend had not started, that maybe Mother would not have noticed that she had been single for ten years, that hers had been the only grandson in the entire looban for that same length of time, that Grandpa would not have permanently rocked back and forth on his chair, away from the dining table; that

Grandma would not have noticed that I was quietly delinquent with my church duties, saying yeas and nays to the minister's rhetorical questions come Sunday.

My younger and half brother, D Jr., who had inherited none of the brooding Buenviaje blood save for all that cheerfulness around a dining table, phoned me one year after I had left Grandma's house for good. I could tell he had been crying for a long time. Between sniffs and swallowed phlegm and sobs, he asked me how come I wasn't home, as though I had only spent a weekend away from the clan, and not an entire year. As D spoke, I could hear in the background footfalls and random bits of talk and the grating of furniture on the tiled floor and Mother's choice-curtains being swished aside. The receiving room was being prepared for the wake. Mother and her siblings were probably busy attending to the funeral details. I could imagine Grandma stern and stoic through all this, her low hoarse voice remaining paced down but always near the edge of an outburst, her hands clasped on her lap except when she had to reach underneath her thin gold-rimmed glasses to wipe the beginning of a tear.

Her husband sawed off chunks of that long dining table himself, because everyone else was too busy having a family of their own. Her husband taught me to read before I started kindergarten. Her husband was asking where I was the moment before his second heart attack subsided.

Grandpa never taught any of his other grandchildren to read.

I would wake up, in my room in Suarezville, to the sounds of morning rush, muffled only by my bedroom door, which Mother would knock on to check if I was awake. She or her husband would cook whatever breakfast they could, pack up the school backpacks and baon of my half-brothers, and drive off - Mother and her husband to work, the kids dropped off at school. I would not go with them. My classes at UP Diliman were either too early, which meant I had to leave before they prepped for work, or too late. Either way, I wanted the house for myself.

I had developed a need for stillness, a certain quiet I found only in two houses we moved into - the one right beside a Catholic chapel, and this church, with its second floor pointed and missing only a crucifix but in aura it felt like you could confess when inside; at least when the parents are not fighting and when the kids downstairs are not fighting, so that I could hear myself think through all these readings, photocopies strewn all over the carpet in my room, because, and again, several Philosophy papers must be finished. There is a disconnect here, I know: as a kid I loved watching my family talk and debate and laugh. And now I long for mornings when they leave, and for evenings to quiet down when they sleep.

My often-open bedroom windows framed for me another reason why this house was, for the most part, dead quiet: outside, a horizon of white and gray crucifixes in an uneven but still landscape, distant and peaceful. We had moved into a house near where people have moved on. While I overheard Mother's husband sometimes tell his kids ghost stories no doubt inspired by the dead lands nearby, I found silent evenings,

when only moonlight illuminated the distant crucifixes for me, comforting. I imagined I was the last person on earth, because everyone, finally, was at his best behavior.

This was how I measured my mornings in my church. Thank you for the stillness. The Land Cruiser's engine fading away. Thank you for the long stairway down, I took my steps slowly, feeling the walls made cold by a sun that was still to rise. The only unused mug in the dish rack, a strangely brownish-yellow one, would be mine. Thank you for a kitchen that is deserted save for me. I would not anymore blend with the large-numbered calendar beside the brand-new Frigidaire, and there is no God Bless Our Home hung anywhere, and the dining table, so that no portion of it would be sawed off - Mother's stab at permanence - was a round one. My kokote is here, firmly with me, but only when you're all gone.

At night, when sleep would evade me, I would wait until daybreak to swish Mother's curtains aside, and witness sunlight bathe the fields outside - from a humming dimness to a bright and crisp day, all that talahib in eternal sway, the access road a stone's throw from our gate, large potted plants elbowing for a semblance of greenery, but it would not be the same. What if Grandma's dining table was not cut down? Then the other appliances would not have fit. What if I started cooking for the clan? But I can't even remember the names of Grandma's garden plants, much less vegetables. In parallel universe I am a dashing conversationalist, the focal point of family gatherings, able to coax Grandma into telling us again all those stories from the Second World War, getting away with nudging Grandpa, despite his genetic grumpiness, to describe the engkanto and kapre and tiyanak that plagued his route home from work back when my

uncles and aunts were, like me before the house changed, around ten years old. So, in my room inside my church, I would just close my eyes instead, bundle up and hug my blanket with flower patterns, proudly wearing my uncle's holey shirt, grateful for the stillness in the house that would also, as with the clan élan, not last.

There are patterns, rhythms of life that one wakes up for, cherishes, and longs for when the cycles are gone.

I have seen pictures of Mother in her office uniform and in her red shapely flowery dress, before floods ruined our furniture and destroyed all the family albums; floods that forced us to bring in more hollow blocks and more concrete until we had made our floors beyond flood-reach, only that the entire house looked like a concrete warehouse: the ceiling looked silly and low and the large windows in the receiving rooms had been dwarfed. Now that those albums are gone, we have no proof that the house was once large, well-aired, and happy, and that my uncles and aunts were once children around a long dining table before the family branched out and cut that table down to size.

In one picture I remember, Mother had a baby me cradled on one arm with the other holding a feeding bottle to a squinting and bald little me, as though I had been born into doubt.

Mother had already been working the year before I was born. She had stopped attending college classes at the University of the East to help her mother make ends meet, buy me toys, and help out in paying for her younger sister, Aunt C's college

tuition. The formula for sustaining college education in a lower middle class family was for one sibling to work to pay off a younger one's college fees, so that the younger sibling could, in turn, work and pay for the tuition of yet another younger sibling, so that the eldest sibling could take her breath and have a life of her own.

The house, already on its way to becoming claustrophobic had changed again and immediately after an aunt graduated from college and took on a job as a bank teller. We had to make room for her child and her husband. The grandparents, having the largest room in the house, had to relocate to the boys' room, which left the boys, the unmarried men, including a grade school me, “temporarily” sleeping in the sala. With a new baby in the house, the grandparents seemed pleased, or at least Grandma was. Grandpa rocked the days away out in the sala with the perpetual bad news booming out of his radio and glaring at him in bold all capitals on his newspapers' front pages.

This pattern would repeat for the next five siblings who brought home a spouse, a pattern that elbowed for more space, repurposing the garden are into a room, the ceiling to serve as flooring for a second floor, the sala converted into a partition, kitchen door to become a narrower often-closed one, and the plants and trees in the garden gone for good.

I close my eyes and I am eleven years, with no boxes to lift and secure, and no thoughts of ever moving out of Grandma's house. I am in grade four. It is 1987.

Mother, then single for ten years, ended her solo domestic life one afternoon when she brought home, for all the looban to see, a man. Another Catholic. Whereas she failed to convert my father into the Iglesia ni Cristo faith, this one seemed all too willing to embrace what I thought was for him an awkward-fitting religion.

I was running home, ignoring the weight of my backpack as I cut across a basketball court that fronted our house. Drunk laughter roared all the way from half the court. Wiping the sweat on my face against the sleeve of my polo shirt, I reached for the bolt on the other side of the gate, and tried to foresee what the bonanza was all about. Someone gave birth, a balikbayan was passing by, a distant uncle was celebrating his birthday, or someone was getting married.

Mother sat on the arm of an old Narra chair, where this man, almost turning red from the beer, was seated. He smiled at me. Mother's shoulder laughed along with her as her brothers and sisters and Grandparents did the same. They were all in the middle of some wholesome story, I was sure. Mother waved for me to come over as my eyes met the seated person's eyes.

I must have flashed him a proud-confused smile and I hugged my Mother, my Mother in her shapely flowery dress.

I rub my eyes and it is eleven years later. It is 1997.

Mother and I will forever know, and not just remember, what he looked like, because he looks exactly like my half-brother, D Jr. But only Mother knows what his face was like immediately before and immediately after she shoved a half-glassful of muriatic acid on his face - her husband, my stepfather, D Sr. It remains funny, no matter

how many times I tell it again. It is now nine years since Suarezville, and eight years since I left my Grandmother's house.

I'm just happy my youngest half-brother looks exactly like me, only with darker skin, better at basketball, and completely the opposite of his anti-social eldest brother. This way, Mother doesn't miss me as much. Someone else, but with the same searching and distrustful eyes, now tugs at her duster.

The story goes, as my Aunt E told it, was that she and Mother and me Uncle S went to my stepfather's brother's house, where the culprit wanted to talk peacefully with Mother. D Sr. explained calmly to Mother that his getting his secretary pregnant was not merely an accident, but one for which he was going to take responsibility. Mother hardly blinked but just swallowed several times, Uncle S said, while D Sr. told his side of the tale. I knew that fake sympathy pose. Mother used it in the office where she, as Department Supervisor, lorded over a regularly shuffled staff.

Conveniently, the secretary was not there. When D Sr. finished, Mother excused herself and went to the comfort room, where they all thought she cried. While my stepfather continued to talk in his low sorry monotonous sincere voice about life being what it is, he saw a blur of the woman he married . . . just before his eyes burned. He scrambled past Mother, who stood by watching, as he tripped over a stool and fell over, crawled on the linoleum while he screamed, before his brother helped him up and walked him to the dirty kitchen sink's faucet.

I remember sinking deeper into the old cushion of the old sofa back in Grandmother's house while I listened to Aunt E and Uncle S tell the story, one of them

beginning the scene, the other cutting in to wedge in left out details, the other laughing at the part when D Sr. crawled on badly cut linoleum. Mother was not with us in the room that night, as her siblings talked about her in the third person, and I imagined her smiling just before and after that acid scene. I laughed hard, and then suddenly stopped, worried my brother were around and listening. That was their father, after all. I had not grown up with mine.

That night, Mother and the kids and I went back to our apartment in Suarezville. The crickets then were annoyingly noisy. In the other room, where Mother and the kids slept, I knew mother was awake. I had a feeling that man would be an awkward fit for the clan, but I would not tell Mother that. Not back when I was in grade four, and not that night.

The next day we would find out the extent of D Sr.'s commitment to his secretary: we would never see him again. The following week, we were to be informed of how Mother's investment had panned out. A month later, we would move out of that apartment, the one looking down on the road, on the elbow of nowhere.

I was in grade five when Mother and I left Grandma's to live with her man, in this slightly run-down apartment hidden by two dark eskenitas and accentuated by thin walls. Someone in this dual income couple set up, not Mother, lived inside a Tagalog action film, where a brazen and youthful Rudy Fernandez eloped with a lady of better

standing and brought her to an anonymous town and lived there happily. The recently not-single-anymore nodded and ran away with the man.

I had never seen Mother like that: her tummy as big as a house (D Jr.) was on the way, giggling every night over dinner on our makeshift table over corny jokes, adoring this man who sang her silly Visayan love songs she and I could not understand. I could throw a tennis ball and it would bounce off of the walls and ricochet back to me in seconds, and that would be the dimensions of the apartment. The only thing that reached from floor to ceiling were the walls.

My room and my parents' had thin walls, and I had the theory that Mom giggled herself to sleep with this new man. Outside our apartment's window, I could see roofs dying of rust. Twice a week, the neighbor's wayward son came home to punch his father silly and make her mother and sister cry until they gave him some money. We heard all of it, and it kept us afraid and up all night. My stepfather had his weapon out and open, as though he could fend off a convict twice his size with a butterfly knife. Then, by two, in the morning, things quieted down and we slept, too tired to be afraid.

Mother even took on new chores in our new home, chores she didn't have to do back in Grandma's house. Once she came home crying because the plastic bag of her two kilos of rice ruptured. The same night she told her husband of the worry she went through over the rice. Then they giggled themselves to sleep.

Mother was so happy.

I remember my stepfather's voice on the telephone. It was then a week after we had left our house in Suarezville, and more than a month after the acid scene.

“Can you still see with both eyes?” I wanted to ask, but didn't. He spoke as I stared at Grandma's old family photographs, at least those that remained. There's me and Mother and this guy, the one I'm listening to. I picked it up and tried to blot out his face with a pencil. Aunt E snatched the frame from me and glared at my childishness. I shrugged: these things happen.

“Don't let your Uncle S get that Land Cruiser. That's yours.”

He sounded worried. D Sr. was a partner in a car repair shop specializing in Mercedes Benz and BMWs that he and his kumpare had put up when they both resigned from the company Mother worked for. When Mother talked to the kumpare after the acid scene, he said the business was doing great. Except that the dual income family was single income again. We also saw a picture of the secretary. Rank and file. Plain as a brown Manila envelope.

"I'll take care of it," I said, almost in a whisper.

"Take care of your brothers."

"Do you sing her Visayan love songs?"

We never had a lot to talk about, not in the beginning, except maybe about Samboy Lim, and certainly not in the end. The line went dead and I cradled the phone as Aunt E continuously tried to rub off my penciled marks on the photo frame.

"Ayaw matanggal," she said. "Masyado ka madiin magsulat."

When Anne and I pushed the boxes deeper into the back of the truck, a neighbor asked if we were leaving that apartment, the one hidden from the road, with its second floor roof seemingly dying of rust, its windows forever a closed eyelid to the blazing sun. A church had been built right beside it, tearing down the trees that once shielded us from the intense summer sun and the flying debris during storms. Anne said yes as I carried more boxes into the truck. Neighborly small talk was rare for us, she being a call center team supervisor, asleep during daylight and awake just before dinner; and me being a PR firm writer, away at work while all the aunts and uncles were gossiping at home, and busy sending Anne off - backpack and baon - right after I got back from the office.

We were used to this – all this packing, moving, resettling, moving again. And the house we're moving into, in Makati, near Anne's office, seemed not an awkward fit. We were leaving this place, this oddly-placed dwelling abandoned by the church to the elements. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and picked up the small talk where Anne left it: why we were leaving. The boys in the units sandwiching ours had become too noisy. Anne needed to sleep during the day. I needed my quiet at night, to write. The old woman nodded as I pushed, my with my left hand, the small of back. Listening to myself say it, it sounded rehearsed, practiced. What I didn't mention was that the neighbors fought in screaming matches during lunch and dinner. And that I missed the trees.

Anne pulled the ropes binding the boxes tighter and at me. I smiled to the old woman as I hauled in a roped-tight box containing Anne's favorite blankets, ones with

flower patterns, the same design on the plate Mother used to dine on, the same one on the thermos we had bought at the nearby market. Anne and I have been each other's perpetual tag-alongs since college, which is why we're in the market for a small comfy round dining table, my attempt at permanence. Unlike me, she is an excellent cook. I have a need for stillness, for a sanctuary, and in this dual-income couple, someone has does, too.

Seated beside the truck driver, I glanced at Anne's shapely flowery blouse, the one she wears on Thursdays as she lords over what would be, if they did not respond to her training, a regularly shuffled staff. There is not a single trace of her Visayan accent, not in her Tagalog, not in her recently accent-less English. There is no parallel universe, gardens are turned into rooms, trees and long dining tables get cut down, there are no more apartments on the elbow of nowhere. But with me, Anne will keep laughing along with her shoulders.

I gave the driver a nod and the engine came to life. A small pocket calendar taped above the truck's rearview mirror said 2007. The arching entrance to our overpopulated baranggay read, as we passed under it: You are now leaving Krus na Ligas.