

The Auroras

The most beautiful woman in the world, the newsprint on her lap boasts, in the country's grandest address. Aurora runs her hand flat across the single sheet, thinking too late of the stain it would leave on the gloves she was foolish to have worn.

Silk, Aurora now understands, does not belong in the homeland.

It has taken her eight years to know this for a fact. She rubs the tips of her fingers together. Look at me now, Aurora thinks, I'm a woman of the world.

Aurora looks across at Armi, sees that her sister-in-law – her charge, as Armi calls herself – is beaming. I'm a fairy tale, Armi has said more than once and to more than a handful of people – her English lilting, the bowed lips slow to form the words. Aurora knows Armi's spiel by heart: a high school girl from Muhos, Finland takes a chance, is rewarded. How does it feel to be the first ever?, she is asked. There will be a second, a third, a tenth, a twentieth – but me!, Armi replies. And then Armi almost always trails off, laughing. She is so disarmingly young, Aurora thinks every time.

Jakob – this is her husband, her Jakob – leans toward her and she tells him, Look at that behemoth. She raises the flyer as the car pulls up the driveway – image and

structure soon coalesce, the photograph in her hand mottled by this morning's coffee, the hotel in front of her glaring white against the backdrop of sky. Impressive, Jakob says. Not at all what I had in mind. Aurora can smell the sea just beyond them, sharp and tangy. Already she feels late-afternoon mist clinging to her cheeks.

Armi, she notes, remains inviolate. Against sun, against sea breeze, against the sudden, muted explosions of flashbulbs. Miss Kuusela, they all call. Armi!, beckon the more brazen among them. Welcome to the Philippines, Miss Universe! Their repeated summons has Armi's smile widening. Aurora catches her sister-in-law's eye and they both laugh. The universe, they have both exclaimed in the weeks past. My face has laid claim to the universe, Aurora. They have tittered over the presumptuousness of the title. Eighteen, Aurora thinks. This girl is eighteen.

Aurora brushes her hand against the back of her neck, now framed by the small curls that have escaped the elaborate, if severe, hairstyle. She is not one to wilt in heat, and Aurora wills her body to remember the press of that heavy air against skin. It is just March, it will get warmer. This is nothing, Aurora reminds herself. She is wearing her best cotton dress, in the ecru she so likes. There is a comb in her hair, and it has long ago proven itself stalwart against the drag of humidity.

Armi is in blue satin, her face is framed by her blonde curls. The most beautiful woman in the world—nay, in the universe—is helped out of the car first. (Aurora waits for that telltale shudder—that kind when the body is unable to hide from itself—from the bellhop helping Armi alight the car. Did they draw straws? Was this young,

pockmarked man handpicked for the job?) Jakob follows his sister out, and turns to Aurora, taking her hand. Your castle awaits you, Madame.

The lobby, of course, is abuzz. A crowd has gathered around Armi and Aurora lets Jakob stray toward it. Are you excited? they ask. Should we expect a rivalry? And they all laugh. Aurora moves to stand by the wall, but she is arrested by the ceaseless glint-and-glimmer of the chandeliers hanging heavy from the ceiling. A young girl runs across the expanse of floor, weaving in and out of the herd of guests in their best suits, the reporters with their unstarched cuffs, the women in their low heels and coral lipstick. There is an old man standing across the lobby; she sees first his halo of gray hair, and then she sees his bare feet. Aurora looks away.

Jakob retrieves her, his arm snaking around her waist. Ain't this grand, he says. Have you ever been here before? Her husband, Aurora is sure, feels warm in his suit. If she asks him to take off his hat, she might see his sweat staining its inner lining, she might see his blonde hair turned dark. A timid approximation of brown.

Of course I have, she says. Everyone has. Including, she reminds him, Armi Kuusela. And Jakob's arm tightens around her for a moment before saying, Yes, isn't that the coup of the decade?

* * *

She should have written. It is not too late; Aurora can say, "I have returned," and perhaps he will smile when he reads her missive. Or perhaps not. She can tell him that her hair has grown even longer, though next to no one ever sees it now; she can confess that she once thought of the skin of the back of her neck as not unlike the glooming

paper from a book that has long remained unread. She can tell him that her palms remain roughened, no matter the creams Armi brings home. She can tell him about her hipbones, that the dip between them remains. She can tell him she is married. She can tell him she is here because her husband's sister wanted them with her. It will be a homecoming for you, Armi said. And I get to give someone a crown! Imagine that, Aurora will write the Colonel: this adolescent blessing the country's most-beautiful-of-1953? I live with Finns, she will write the Colonel; my children will be most assuredly blonde, and not improbably blue-eyed. Manila, Jakob told her weeks ago, Armi by his side letting the word trip from her tongue. Manila, Manila—say you'll come, Aurora. We have been sisters-in-law for only nine weeks, she will write the Colonel, and it would have been bad form to say no. She is painfully young, and I do love her. Can you imagine, she will ask the Colonel, we are here at the expense of the state you so love, just to pick one beauty among many? You must know Armi, she will write the Colonel, you must have seen her already—she is the most beautiful woman in the world.

Just your luck, her Manuel might write back.

Aurora Kuusela, he might say. Someone will name a flower after you.

* * *

He'd walked up to her, that third time she'd seen the Colonel beyond the magazines her mother took home with her. He strode across the lobby, with its floors still pockmarked, and asked her, You are keen on staying here? The haze-and-drone of cigarette-roughened voices around them had not faded when he spoke; laughter still burst and

the first of the glasses that had been brought out still came together in little, pinprick clinks. Aurora looked up at the Colonel and almost murmured, Manuel.

I am, she said instead. She was sixteen then, she was wearing her best dress. She wore that best dress for every day she'd worked there. My name is Aurora, she told the Colonel, and she marveled at how far back she had to tilt her head to meet his eyes.

Brown, she realized then. Those eyes were brown.

Another Aurora, he said. When she began to smile, he told her, Keep your hair pinned back, that's how it's done. And then: Mother of God, you are too young for this.

And then the Colonel pushed himself off the counter—how had she failed to note how gravely he'd leaned toward her?—and he marched off. No, he walked away. Aurora had wanted to run her fingertips against the marble surface, let her skin glance against its veins in search of his heat. She told herself it was not a disappointment that he had not remembered. She told herself this, as she reached into the pocket sewn into the folds of the skirt of her best dress, fishing out her mother's jade-laced comb.

* * *

She and her husband are assigned a room overlooking the swimming pool and, beyond that, the sea. The waters, at this time, have turned a muted orange. I like being by the sea, she remembers telling Jakob nine weeks ago—on the night of their wedding. That out there is a lake, sweeting, he responded, an apology. On their bed, she finally turned to him, murmuring, Never mind, and: I love you, you know.

Jakob is now puttering around the room, although Aurora has told him that she can do his unpacking for him. But her husband Jakob has insisted: You and I are here on vacation. Think of it as our honeymoon.

Below her, by the pool, a couple—both young, from the taut curves that she could see of their faces, from the glossy crowns of their hair—have their heads bent close. A shuffling of feet, a bracing of shoulders, Aurora sees: the furious brows, the hard lines of their lips. The boy stalks off, though he turns back one last time for one last word. The girl lights a cigarette, moves deeper into the foliage. Her brow is wide and clear.

Jakob is saying, I have to check on Armi next door. And Aurora says, Of course. Aurora tells him, I will be fine. Then, silence. Aurora allows herself a whimsy; she tells herself her husband must walk up behind her, place his hands on her shoulders that he may lean in close, and closer, and confess that he has never found her so beautiful as she is now, watching a young girl smoking in the aftermath of a lovers' spat.

Her husband does walk up behind her, and he does place his hands on her shoulders. But he doesn't pull her close to him. Her husband drops a kiss low on her nape, where her spine rises, and he says, Lie down for a while, Miss Philippines, you must be tired. Aurora nods, the motion rubbing her skin against his lips. *Walang asawa na makakatulad ka sa bait at sa lahat ng bagay*, she thinks, almost in sing-song.

When Jakob leaves, she climbs onto the bed, careful to leave her feet hanging off the edge. She wonders if there are still canopied four-posters in this hotel—or was that too old-world now? She must ask Armi; if anyone will have that romantic throwback—

those fussy curtains, the embroidery on the underside of the canopy, the spindly pillars rising around the sea-foam mattress – it will be Armi.

She runs one hand over the bedspread, and she notes that no dust rises.

She may write the Colonel: The hotel has vastly improved in the years that you and I have been gone. Someone has proven himself better than you at this job.

What was she then? The too-young receptionist? Occasional chambermaid? The somber cook's erstwhile errand girl? Those days, though the radio had already announced the surrender of the Japanese, anyone who threaded their fingers through the air came away with soot. Those who risked the pilgrimage back into the shelled building, they all saw her and did not ask where her mother was. Aurora, some of them would call, not there, that column might not hold. She accepted what kindness they could give. Perhaps they knew, then, all of them. Perhaps they saw. She knows now that all of them yearned for a reason to walk across the city, and only then toward what once relentlessly lit up the bay. A comfort, more than a citadel. At the very least, they were all like Aurora: quite simply, they had nowhere else to go to.

The Colonel met them a week after he was assigned the task he would much later describe to Aurora as Herculean. They – stray animals unable to not keep returning to what has already been abandoned – had all come out slowly, drawn to the man who stood still in the middle of the torn lobby – right at the heart of their mass of makeshift shelters. They clutched their rosaries in their hands, the photos of their departed. A chandelier lay dulled on the floor right behind him. Aurora trailed after the crowd.

When they had all gathered, he said, I am the new General Manager.

You can all help me, the Colonel told them.

He marched down the line of ragtag help—and was he not, in those moments, in top form? Was her Colonel not magnificent as he strode?—and he told them, We will find a way. He said it in English, and then he said it in Spanish. His audience swayed, waiting for the softer susurrus of the mother tongue. But the Colonel stepped back and with a nod, terse—the Colonel, their Stoic!—he excused himself. She, of course, stared after him, drawn by the line of his spine. It was the second time she'd seen this man—and this meeting, that day, would go on. Blessedly.

But, oh—he was so angry when he caught her hours later. She had wandered into the quarters upstairs, deposited herself on the forlorn mattress on the floor. The canopy had disappeared, but the posts had fallen against each other, the fabula of a tent. She had been waiting for the sun to emerge from the torn line of roof above her.

It was quiet; she could believe, then, in the peacetime.

The breeze carried the sea, and it stung her cheeks.

And then the Colonel came. He extended a hand toward her, he said, You are not supposed to be here. She looked at him for a long time before she slipped her hand in his. Her palms were rough, but so were his. Are you trying to kill yourself, child?

She was shaking her head as she rose from the mattress.

She looked up at him, saw that the twist of anger, of panic, she glimpsed in his face had gone; the Colonel of the stolen magazines had returned. He was not looking at her. He was looking at the bay too-clearly revealed. At the wreckage around them, at the floor of the ballroom he should not have been seeing from this high up.

Aurora slowly slid her hand from his grasp, and he let it go. She wanted to say, Does it not look like God's hand once emerged from the clouds and merely swept away the walls of our hotel? She wanted to say, too, that she was sorry.

Her hair had been bound so tightly, the skin around her ears ached for days.

Eight years later, Aurora sighs at the remembrance of that pain.

* * *

Jakob returns as her supper is brought into the room. My head aches, she tells him. I cannot dine downstairs. The long trip exhausted me, I only feel it now. She is not lying.

Her husband takes her hand and tells her, Armi is beside herself. The President has asked to see her. Aurora smiles and says, She's charming enough to turn them on their heads. Jakob's brow furrows and she says, Armi will be fine. Jakob says, We're going to a palace tomorrow – the man lives in a palace! At this, Jakob bows his head, murmurs, I can't take you, I'm sorry. Aurora understands, of course. She is not supposed to be here, after all. She is Jakob's wife, Jakob merely the brother-invited.

May I have dinner with you? her husband asks.

* * *

She has that comb, still. It is an efficient thing, light, un-gaudy. Jakob likes telling her how beautiful it looks nestled in her hair – the pale of the green peeking out of her dark, dark crown. He tries, her husband. That's very pretty, he tells her whenever she uses the comb. Again and again: Very pretty, sweeting. Sometimes, he runs his knuckles against her bared nape as he says it.

She used to wonder how this trinket—it fit the palm of her hand—could gather thick hair, this long hair, hair she is still too vain to have styled in the new way. Sometimes, she can forget that the comb is still in there, in that mass somewhere—until she lies down to sleep and she unravels and her hair unfurls, and she wakes up the next morning to the comb mute against their pillows.

* * *

Armi swept in this morning, and she pressed her palm against Aurora's forehead. I do not know you to be so fragile, my dear. Aurora said, Do say hello to the President for me. Armi said, Oh yes, look at me, meeting presidents. Armi sighs. Books, dear, really?

Aurora almost says that Armi has just echoed her mother. Books again, darling girl too smart for her own good? she would say, maybe as she was removing her earrings, paste they were. And then: *Tama na muna 'yan, anak. Kumain na tayo.*

It's your fault, mother, Aurora would always reply as she uncurled herself to do her mother's bidding, and it was true—her mother took home the books the guests had left, dazed by her song. Her mother liked to tell her, That's the only reason I have this job, you know. I lull the men into leaving their books behind. And, yes—Aurora loved sitting by the curtains, just behind the band. Her mother, impossibly tall, her back swaying. The men with their hats on the tables, right beside their drinks—and, sometimes, a book. *Huwag mo 'kong biguin*, her mother crooned. *Huwag kang bumitaw.*

Aurora has asked for cigarettes from the concierge. It takes a while for the drag to go down smooth, and for the first half hour of her solitude she sat on the bed with her

head between her knees. She could still write the Colonel, she thought all the while:
You should see me now, Manuel. A woman of the world.

* * *

Ten thousand of them, Manuel told her. All over this room. A wall, and then another.
The place was overrun. I don't know how the General ever moved. It was madness.

There—he would point to a grayed spot, the plaster having fallen off—that one, it
said, Once upon time, the last bear in Luzon hid in a cave just at the edge of Intramuros.
Every night, the indios would offer it food, leaving a basket at the mouth of the cave—a
spare chicken, the best catch from the river. Some child would always leave berries, but
they would be discovered untouched the next day. Every night, the Spaniards threw
their parties and they drank their chocolate and prayed their rosaries, and every night,
the last bear of Luzon would rage. He paced the ground, he scratched at the weeds.

Aurora waited for him to go on. The Colonel said, That's all I read.

A handful of sentences, among ten thousand books?

Oh, look at you, the Colonel said.

* * *

The gardener, Manuel told her, had been so in love with the Don's wife, he named a
flower after her. The grounds were overrun. I bring you the Doña Aurora, the men
would tell their wives in the evenings, holding fistfuls of the too-fragrant, stark white
bloom as they crossed the thresholds to their homes.

* * *

Once, Manuel told her, I went with the Don to inspect a slaughterhouse. Half a pig hung from a hook on the ceiling. Aurora told him, You will give me nightmares, Colonel. And the Colonel only laughed. He did not meet her eyes.

You were always so unsmiling in the photographs, Aurora told him. This forbidding, tall mestizo hovering over Don Manuel. (She could never tell the Colonel that she, younger still then, had thought him so handsome.) We always wondered where you'd come from. Or, at the very least, what it was that you did.

In answer, the Colonel says: I was not allowed here before, not even when I was with Don Manuel. They barely tolerated him, the great leader of the Commonwealth. The Colonel laughs. I was not American, you see. But from outside the hall, the Colonel said, Waiting for the Don to come back out, I could hear your mother singing.

* * *

Aurora has borrowed a cream dress from Armi, for tea in the hotel's best drawing room. Women of the esteemed Manila are in the room with them, and Aurora listened to the parade of names. The lady beside her was craning her neck to look at Armi. Aurora leaned against her sister-in-law and murmured, You realize half the room wants to shove me aside to get this seat? Armi says, her voice not lowered, You are made of sterner stuff, dearest. You will not throw me to the wolves.

Aurora looks around the room, reciting names in her head: Mrs. Coron, Mrs. de Lucia, Mrs. Wainwright, Mrs. Pedrosa. The Misses Torres, the Widow Navarra. At the far end of the room, by the window that opened to a view of the gardens, stands the girl—the girl with the brow wide and clear. Aurora wants to ask if she and her young

man have reconciled, she wants to caution her about smoking by the poolside where any of the self-important (and, she allows, the truly important, too) guests could see her. Aurora can see the girl's awe over Armi. Today, Armi is in pink. The girl is staring, too intently and too uncaringly so to be polite, but no one notices. Mrs. Harrison has launched into a treatise on the merits of aloe vera for one's sunburnt skin.

Aurora tries to meet the girl's eyes.

She will write to the Colonel: I never told you this, Manuel, but I had seen you once before—before you stood in the middle of that wrecked lobby and waited for us to come to you. I was young, that first time, very young—so young, I could hide behind my mother, and no one paid me heed. You must remember her face, you must remember how tall she was. President Quezon passed us—in the lobby of this very hotel—and in his arm was his wife, the woman flowers were named for. And there you were, in your uniform, your Hessians—your dark hair slick against your skull. How stern you were, Manuel. How you surveyed the crowd that had gathered around the Don and the Doña, how imperious you were. You met my eyes, my dear Colonel, you looked at me—how could you have seen me?—and you did not look away.

The room around Aurora has frozen, she realizes. The old man she saw on her first day back—the man she'd looked away from—is standing in the middle of the drawing room, just between Miss Lastimosa of the Tacloban Lastimosas and Mrs. Conde. His hair is a halo of gray. He is wearing a white suit. His feet on the carpet are bare. He smells like lilacs, Aurora notes, and the lines on his face run deep.

The man raises a finger toward her. I know you, he says.

Beside her, Armi giggles. How do you do? she says.

Burly men in the hotel colors come in, having been summoned by an unseen hand. Aurora recognizes the bellhop that helped Armi alight the car—and, yes, his gaze lingers over the hem of her sister-in-law's pink dress.

Mr. Hudson, the men say, you have to leave now, we're sorry.

The lady sitting on the other side of Aurora—Mrs. Orosa, she remembers—is saying, Father of a war hero, that Mr. Hudson. They could never make him leave, and now see where that misguided hospitality has gotten us.

Mr. Hudson is led away. He tells Armi, in inflected Tagalog, that it was very nice to meet her, that she looks very fetching in pink. He looks at Aurora, and Aurora hears: *Huwag mo 'kong biguin*, the man is singing. *Huwag kang bumitaw*.

The room, almost as one, shakes its head.

Armi insists on a translation. And then, addressing the room at large, she presses a hand against her bosom, and says, I do believe I've been courted, yes? The women laugh. Your charmers, Armi says. This country is overrun by charmers!

Aurora does not know Mr. Hudson. Her hand buries itself in her skirt—she will have to apologize to Armi for the creases. Aurora does not know Mr. Hudson, not with his gray hair, not with his white suit, not with his lined face. She closes her eyes, thinks of his bare feet. She thinks of them in shoes. Aurora begins to giggle—several beats too late, she knows, from the chorus of the ladies around her. She must stop, she knows—there, they will start pointing, Miss Armi's *hipag*.

Armi, her most-beautiful-woman-in-the-universe Armi, presses a sweat-slicked hand on her bared arm, leans toward her, and says, Oh, sweeting, I am sorry.

* * *

Aurora never asked her mother where the comb had come from. Her mother gave it to her at the height of the summer of 1945, saying, Please take care of yourself, my too-smart girl. And her mother stroked Aurora's cheek. And then her mother left.

A handful of months after that, mere weeks after the Japanese had surrendered, when Manuel Nieto had caught her in the General's quarters, tracing the sun's progress in the sky: Her hair had been bound so tightly, the skin around her ears ached for days. She wanted to point this out to him, wanted to say, Look at me trying. The comb had been buried in her bound tresses, and she wanted to point this out too: Look, my mother gave me this. Colonel, this trinket in my hair was her parting gift.

But the Colonel was looking out into the bay, and it was a long time before he looked at Aurora again. He asked her, though, his eyes trained to a point too far away – that gaze so inward, so apparent in its lack of involvement in *her*, she realized, it was a trespass to witness it – he asked her, What is it you do here?

Nothing formal, Colonel, she said. She told the truth. I help around.

And then: Please don't ask me to leave, Colonel.

The Colonel said, They knock on my door and tell me to put this place to rights. Or keep an eye on it. The Colonel, at last, looked at her. Do you know who I am?

Yes, I do.

A good man lived here once.

Yes, Colonel, I know.

Did you know, then, about the ten thousand? The Colonel didn't wait for her to answer. Ten thousand of them, he said. All over this room. A wall, and then another. The place was overrun. I don't know how the General ever moved. It was madness.

I don't know, Aurora began, how the General could have ever left this room.

He looked at her, he said, I don't know where they are now.

He looked at the jagged tear on the floor—God's hand, she'd thought, claiming and tearing asunder. You really shouldn't be here, young lady, Manuel Nieto says.

Do not return here, please, the Colonel says, unless I am with you.

* * *

Eight years ago, the Colonel gave her a letter. Written by a man named Manuel, to a woman named Aurora. *Patawarin mo ako sa lahat ng aking naging kamalian sa iyo. Ang pag-ibig ko sa iyo ay hindi nagbago kailanman. Ang puso at buhay ko'y iyo lamang. Walang asawa na makakatulad ka sa bait at sa lahat ng bagay. Ang buong kaligayahan ay tinanggap ko sa iyo. Sa oras na ito ay paniwalaan mo ang sinasabi ko at manggagaling sa kaibuturan ng aking kaluluwa.* My darling sweetheart, the letter began.

I don't know what to do with it, the Colonel said. I'm not supposed to have it.

And he left her standing behind the counter, the letter trembling in her hands.

Aurora's hair was once again unfurled down her back.

* * *

Armi and Jakob had gone to Baguio, with the rest of the party. More politicians, Jakob told her last night, wanted to meet his sister up north. In the mountains, he said, if

you've ever heard a more ridiculous thing. Baguio, Aurora told him, slowly releasing the word—you and Armi are going to Baguio.

Jakob came in late last night. He apologized. He reeked of smoke. She did not mind, not really. She listened as he bathed, her hand running over the bedspread again and again. He returned to the bedroom, a towel too low on his hips, and he said, I keep taking baths, sweeting. I don't know how you stand it.

And then: Give me a while, will you, Mrs. Kuusela?

She turned on the bed. But she already glimpsed the sheen of his skin—pale made ghostly, she was dismayed to note, by the white curtains filtering the too-bright night outside. He is carelessly soft, her Jakob: no reason to be taut around the middle, where she let her hands linger whenever he embraced her; his hipbones have all but disappeared against that first give of flesh; his buttocks and thighs were on a descent into slackness. She was embarrassed for her husband, Aurora realized. She burrowed her head against the pillow and inhaled the fragrance of spring blooms.

The weight of Jakob, a near-negligible dip in the bed: No need to keep the light on? The lamp clicked off, the room remained lit by the moon low over the bay.

And now, Jakob has gone. In her hands, now, is a short note, delivered express at the expense of the hotel—the woman at the concierge is keen on telling her this. Jakob has written that a Congressman, this rising star, stood up during breakfast and told Armi, All of them are married; you'll have me instead. All the married men, including the President (him again!), laughed. Armi did, too, Jakob says, but he is not worried about the young politician. He is not worried at all.

When Armi returns, Aurora thinks, I will tell her: Armi, you are so young, and so very beautiful. So very beautiful for your own good. Your face has laid claim to the universe. Who will you love, Armi? Who may take your hand?

The woman asks: Is there anything else I can help you with, Mrs. Kuusela?

Aurora wants to ask her if she knows the girl who fought with her beau, she wants to ask if the young couple has made up. Aurora wants to ask the woman how old she is, and if she could guess how old Aurora was. Aurora wants to ask, Do you think I belong here? Do you think I've come home—because I don't, I really don't. Did you know—Tessa, the curlicues on the woman's nametag reads—Did you know, Tessa, how the Americans put their feet up on our old furniture, their boots sending mud flying, and their cigars grayed our walls? Did you know about my mother, Tessa, how all the men and women poured into the room whenever she sang, and how she loved those dresses that made the matrons blush? Did you know, Tessa, that in this very room, this cavernous room, I once met this tall man, this handsome man straight out of the glossies—this man with his polished Hessians and his hair so precise, and his big, warm hands, those rough palms, his story about the bear? Can you tell me about him, Tessa?

But Aurora thanks Tessa, asks that a pitcher of iced tea be sent up to her room.

Have a good day, Mrs. Kuusela. •