Vile Creatures

English | short story

synopsis

Dina is a single mother of modest means. Her mother and siblings have all gone to Canada, and she lives in a small place in Cubao with her young son and extended family. When her mother dies, she makes the journey to Toronto. She enjoys her days there and finds the city to be a place of wonders, but her peace is disturbed by her son Biboy. When she calls him from half the world away, he tells her that his yaya, an old woman named Yolly who has been with the family many years, has become an aswang. Dina stays longer than she intends, and her calls to her son become more disturbing. When she finally goes home, she finds something waiting for her that she doesn't expect.

There was a girl who had a kind heart and the desire to touch other souls but whose desire was thwarted. Her name was Dina, she was the youngest in a brood of three, and they had most of what they needed in the world but little luxury. And so they thought themselves quite deprived of the good things in life and worked hard to attain them.

Her mother had told her to take commerce when she went to college, and the child had agreed, but when the time came she followed her heart and took education. Her heart was in teaching, and it didn't hurt that when she was in high school she had a wonderful tutor, someone she was always happy to see when she and her classmates came to visit every week. Kat was plump, pale, and earnest and studied in a nearby school for the children of wealthy Chinese Filipinos. Every year her school sent its seniors to benighted ones like Dina's and offered something that looked like hope. Kat taught her math and English. Her lessons in English were particularly helpful because she spoke it so well, so crisply. And she was patient, helping Dina with her own clumsy tongue that banged into her teeth or stuck to her palate. The one hour each week that Kat sat with eight of them seemed magical, as if someone saw her for what she was and cared what she would become.

So when it was time for college she prepared herself for a career as a teacher. Her mother objected, and so did her older sisters, both of whom had left the country and moved to Canada. Her own father was somewhere in the Middle East, she didn't really know where Abu Dhabi was, but he sent home the dollars that he made as some kind of engineer. Eventually the dollars stopped, and her mother found out that he had found another woman, a fellow Filipina who had been working as a nanny, and the two had their own children somewhere in the Visayas. Dina's mother was unperturbed. The older sisters sent more money back, and soon her mother joined them in Toronto. By the time Dina graduated from a small college in Manila, she was alone in the tiny apartment they had been renting since forever in a small

corner of a crowded urban settlement, and her sisters asked her to consider joining them abroad. Their lives were much better there, they said, and mother was much happier.

Dina resisted, spending a few years at a public school nearby. She didn't always mind the large classes, the stuffy rooms packed with more than fifty students at a time, the smells that wafted over from the garbage dump next door, the grounds that quickly turned into a lagoon with every rain (a death or two from leptospirosis every year was unfortunate but not surprising), the general hopelessness of her students (no one learned much and didn't seem to care that they didn't). The boys wanted to be basketball players or star in action movies, the girls wanted to be beauty queens or pop singers. But when she got pregnant, alarm bells went off in her head. How would she provide for her child with her meager salary? When she told her boyfriend that he was going to be a father, he made promises to stay with her and consider marriage and take care of the child. Then he disappeared.

After she gave birth she left teaching with a heavy heart and tried out life as a call center agent. She chose one whose hours weren't that bad. The firm's clients were in Asia, which meant no graveyard shift. But it also meant the rates were lower than those that serviced Americans or Europeans. Still, it was better than her life in a public school, and when she was promoted to trainer she got to do some of the things she did as a teacher, which provided some consolation. To save even more money she gave up the apartment and moved in with her cousins, in a compound in Cubao that housed the children of four families. Dina and her son were the fifth.

After her son turned nine, her mother died. Her sisters told her yet again to come over, and after they offered to pay for her airplane ticket Dina relented. They couldn't pay for Biboy's as well, but it was no matter. It was almost June, school was about to start, and it would be best for him to stay and study. And anyway she would be gone only two weeks. He would be in the care of Marilu, her cousin old

enough to be her tita and who ran the compound, and Yaya Yolly.

It would be her first time on a plane. She hadn't even flown to anywhere in the country, not Boracay or Palawan or any other places she only dreamed of. A beach was Batangas or Zambales, with officemates at the yearly out-of-town R&R paid for by the company, or with a few friends she kept from her school days. She wondered what it might be like to surf in La Union, which a friend had raved about, or to walk on the powdery white sand of Boracay. But she never found out, and had to shelve such such dreams the moment she got back to the office to work another diligent day. She did take back with her the notion that she was happy merely being in the water, or even next to it, no matter what kind of beach it was (even the pebbly surface of the beach at Anilao, which tended to fall cliff-like into the water, didn't faze her). As she went about her business breathing the stale cold air at the office her heart swam in water of the deepest blue.

Leaving the country was new, nerve-wracking and exhilarating. The dim, warehouse-like airport, the bone-jarring terror of takeoff, then the bewildering amazement of being airborne (how astonishing to consider the ingenuity of humankind, that could create such a machine), the plane engines humming, the fuselage softly vibrating, the pretty Korean flight attendants (how wonderful that a country could produce such tall and beautiful girls) serving her with unflagging cheer. Then the awe at the other airports, in Japan then in Toronto, those massive, gleaming structures that outshone anything back home without boasting. They were such a contrast to the airport in her own country's capital city, which she thought seemed unapologetically shabby, like the tough kids at the corner who didn't see how pathetic they were. (Later, when she regaled her sisters with the wonders she had seen, they said they had thought the same things and were no longer impressed.) As the light-headedness of being airborne filled her she resolved to bring Biboy places, to give him the opportunity to see the world and its wonders,

which she never had the chance to do when she was younger.

Beth and Juliet met her at the airport with giddy embraces, and they drove through brightly lit and orderly streets to Ajax, a quiet suburb outside Toronto. The houses seemed to rest on carpets of lush green with bushes and trees. They got Dina connected to the internet, and before she could unpack she called home to Yolly. She regretted not getting one those new "smart" phones, where you could see the image of the person you were speaking to on your screen, but they were expensive, and anyway on the older phones you could thumb the stubby number keys.

Yolly kept house for the cousins and looked after all the children. Biboy had been the youngest in a gaggle of more than a dozen. After he had turned seven, the other children had become teenagers, which meant that he received the bulk of Yolly's attention. After she had reassured Dina that her son was fine, she spoke to Biboy. She made up her mind to call at the end of every day.

The strangeness began at the end of her first week in Toronto. Biboy's voice seemed more tinny and distant than usual.

"Mama, Yaya is an aswang!"

Dina looked at the phone in her hand. Perhaps the distance the call traveled had done something to it.

"What was that, anak?"

"Yaya! I saw her crawling out of her room last night, out the window. This morning Mrs Joson lost the baby." The Josons lived three houses away, a cute young couple with two dogs. Irene Joson was pregnant with her first child when Dina left. The bump wasn't large but it was unmistakable.

"Let me talk to her, anak."

"She's asleep." It was late in the morning back in Manila. "She's been sleeping in since you left, Mama."

"Tell her to message me when she's up, okay? I'll call her later."

"Don't tell her, Mama! She'll hurt me!"

"Biboy, stop it. Just tell her to message me."

When Yolly did, she called the house again. Yolly laughed her big, oily laugh when Dina told her everything. Such a big laugh from a tiny woman, Dina remembered thinking when she first heard it.

"I get up in the middle of the night to pee, Ma'am Dina. I can't help it. Sometimes I go twice. I'm getting old." She had worked for Cora and Marilu, first cousins older by a large margin, for two decades before Dina arrived in their compound. She imagined the ache in the bones of this small, tired woman who had given her, as well as the many cousins and nephews and nieces in that crowded slice of land in the crowded city, the gift of her labor. True, she had a headstrong way about her, and all the younger help they recruited eventually left, unable to stand her. And she had no talent for cooking, turning all fresh ingredients into a gray and soupy mess. But she could be trusted with money, with people. And she herself had weathered decades with them, for them. There were things Dina wished were different about her, but all in all she was grateful.

Yolly said that the maid of the Josons, Nilda, had told her and others in the neighborhood that Mrs Joson had lost the baby. A miscarriage. Maybe all the vegetarian food and herbal teas were responsible, she had said.

Dina doubted that being a vegetarian had anything to do with the miscarriage, but she kept the thought to herself and thanked Yolly for her time and apologized for what her son had said about her.

"Don't worry, Ma'am," Yolly said, sounding bright and cheerful despite being slandered by a young boy. "Biboy is so smart. He's always reading. He has a wild imagination. It's nothing."

What could have made Biboy think that Yolly had turned into one of those vile creatures from folklore? Dina tried to remember exactly what an aswang was, what

made it different from other creatures. The tikbalang was the horse-human, the kapre the ogre with the massive cigar that hid in a tree, the manananggal the one that split in half to go flying in the night, the tiyanak the demon baby. Was the aswang a hybrid of all these, or a generic term that denoted any of them? Was it a kind of vampire? She made a mental note to look it up one of these days. And when she got back she would go through all of Biboy's books. He had shown an interest in reading and gathered what books he could in the house, and sometimes when they were at the mall he would hover in Book Sale
or sit in the food court while she ran errands. Now she needed to know what exactly he was reading.

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Toronto was a wonder from the very start. The cavernous airport, with a well-appointed lobby that reminded her of hotels she could never afford to stay in, was only the beginning. The roads were wide and clean, with orderly processions of cars. Even when stopped in traffic they kept to their lanes, no one elbowing into the path of others. The main highway named Yonge Street ("As in young, not yet old" Juliet said, "not *yong* or *yung,* as in, 'yung taong nakatayo sa kanto"). The many people walking on wide sidewalks. Dogs with rich, smooth pelts on leashes. People sipping drinks in tall glasses on verandas and porches late in the morning. Joggers at noontime. The quaint trams, buses that ran on time (they had schedules!), the subway, the underground corridor that connected buildings to Union station (necessary for winters so you didn't have to walk in the cold), with boutiques and stores, as if you were walking an endless shopping mall. Everything neat and clean and not smelly. It all made so much sense. Why couldn't Manila be like this?

The first order of business was visiting Mama at the cemetery. Resthaven Memorial Gardens was odd with its sprawling beauty, quiet and peaceful and well kept, without the crowds and heat and general unpleasantness of Marikina where

they went to visit dead relatives. The place was impossibly large, bigger than those football fields in the private schools she passed by, with wide roads. So many trees with leaves of different hues, green and yellow-orange and plum-purple. How impressive to devote so much space to those who had passed on. Mama's headstone seemed no different than it might have been had she been buried in Marikina with her siblings, embedded in the ground shoulder to shoulder with many others. It was nothing like the upright stone slabs nearby, which commanded space and attention. But it was elegant enough, a weathered white and gray, and it made her look as if she belonged in this field of dear departed.

She had left the country of her birth, and her remains had no trace of her very different beginnings; they seemed most welcome in this her final resting place half the planet away. Would she brag about it to her siblings, all of whom had gone ahead, wherever they were in the afterlife? She certainly could brag about having the nicest one. Tito Randy, Tito Monching, and Tita Babes were in those vertical cabinets for the dead in a cramped Marikina cemetery, where Dina had to push her way past thick crowds to get to the spot in the back where Mama's kin were. Perhaps she was here now, hovering over them with her older brothers and sister. As she stood at the grave Dina looked around her and imagined their spirits floating in the air behind the old, stately trees, looking upon them beatifically or even sharing a giggle.

A few days before she left she spent an afternoon here, getting off the Scarborough stop of the GO Train and walking the rest of the way. She ambled about, sitting on a bench here, gazing at a bearded statue there, calm and happy in what struck her as a sort of playground where only the cries of children were missing. For these few hours the swell of good feeling enveloped her in its warm, thick wings. Maybe the future held good things for her and her son, and all would be well.

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Having lived in Metro Manila all her life it hadn't occurred to her that you could actually get around a city by walking. Riding the subway, the buses, the tram, all these things excited her. Even the GO Train that carried them to and from Ajax to Union station was a marvel. Clean, efficient, quiet. The ticket that you purchased only once and which got stamped each time by a machine in the entrance hallway. The comfort of the train itself. She sat up for the twenty minutes or so that it took to get to the station, looking at the scenery as it sped by, gazing at the many pretty houses, with plenty of space for gardens and back yards. Beth buried her nose in her iPad, while Juliet had her earplugs connected to her phone.

"Look at you," said Beth, looking up. "Like a little girl."

Dina couldn't hide a grin.

"Don't worry, we were like that, too."

They visited the CN Tower, walked on the glass floor from high above the earth. Dina had wobbled, fallen to her knees, while the others laughed. They had walked down the streets with peculiar names, Queen Street, College Avenue, Dundas (doon-duss? dunn-dass?). Dina pointed to a restaurant that had the word "Ethiopian" on its signboard, but the faces of her sisters indicated that such odd fare wasn't worth exploring.

They looked at clothes in boutiques just off Queen Street. Dina took out her phone and converted the prices into pesos and wondered what the words "fair trade" on the tag meant.

"Expensive," she said.

"If you work here, you get paid well, and things become affordable."

"No way you can afford it if you work in Manila and spend here," Juliet said, a thick maroon scarf between her fingers.

There it was again, the not-so-subtle invitation to move. But why did she even hesitate? What was tying her to Manila? Biboy was the only immediate family she

had back home, and he wasn't even a teenager. He would have no trouble finding his feet here. Her sisters had come over years ago and had made a seamless transition. Even her mother had done so. They had aunts in nearby New York and Chicago, cousins in Vancouver, an uncle in Seattle.

It was Dina who would have a harder time. Her sisters had never married and didn't have children, and her mother took only the memories of the father who had abandoned them, who Dina could barely remember. It was easy to leave, because they were leaving so little behind.

Try as she might, she couldn't think of a good reason to stay in Manila. Yet she hesitated to say yes. Her sisters would take her in, they said, they had plenty of room in the house, which was true. It wasn't that big a house, but they owned it, it was comfortable, it had a backyard, a front yard with trees and shrubs, and in a tranquil suburb outside the city, which was a train or bus away. She could take the basement room, next to the one with the washer and dryer and the old treadmill. So much roomier than the Cubao property where there was someone in every corner.

At night they sat around in the living room and drank tea, though Dina drank hot chocolate. They had gone to a grocery store on the way back, and she had spotted a box of Swiss Miss. She never bought it for herself back in Manila, but she had won a pack during an office Christmas party, and she loved having the luxury of its rich sweetness in her mug, in her mouth. Beth had grabbed a box on the shelf and paid for it, over Dina's half-hearted protestations. Now they sat in the plush sofa set with the lights dimmed, a blue night outside.

"What were Mama's last days like?" Dina asked.

Her sisters told her how marvelous the healthcare system in Canada was, how little they paid for the operations and medicines.

"But was she happy? Did she have any regrets?"

"She said she regretted not coming here sooner, when she was younger and had more energy."

"She was happy here. The only thing she dwelt on was not having you around."

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Her sisters had told her over the years to come to Toronto in "late spring," and now she understood why. The city was beautiful this time of year. It was a mild late morning in her second week there, and they sat at a park table about to eat an early lunch of sausage sandwiches and fries. Dina thought the sunlight through the trees sparkled like jewels. The dogs being walked seemed the handsomest she had ever seen, and the joggers positively glistened.

"Only when it's spring," Beth said. "In winter, oh my God, it's so cold!" She and Juliet mimicked shivering. "It took a while to get used to it."

"During my first winter I cried and told Beth that I wanted to go home," Juliet said, chuckling. "I once called Mama and cried the whole time."

"But you're used to it now," Dina said. "You're in t-shirts and shorts at night and I have to wear a sweater and jeans."

Dina tried to imagine what a cold winter was like. It got cold in December and January in Manila as well, but she could handle it. The worst was an early February in Baguio, when friends from the call center had invited her to a long weekend at a small inn near Camp John Hay. The nights had been so cold her stomach shuddered. It was a good thing they sat around that first night sharing a bottle of brandy. Over here she had to have something thick over her blouse even during the day. But it was a pleasant feeling, the air was crisp, and she much preferred it to the damp, dirty humidity of back home.

Then she got caught in the rain. She was walking from Sobeys twenty minutes away after having bought food to cook that night, Beth and Juliet had done all the cooking, Dina thought she needed to do her share, and she had become comfortable

shopping in it. For the first time she saw cranberries, raspberries, and pomegranates. They were all sweet in their own ways. And how convenient that it was open twenty-four hours. Back home only convenience stores were open day and night, and mostly you could get just soft drinks and alcohol, greasy food, and cigarettes. Juliet and Beth would take their bicycles or walk. The late afternoon was mild and cool and perfect for a walk.

Then just as she was two streets from the house the rain fell. The water was brutally cold. The paper bag felt heavy as bricks as she struggled not to slip on the sidewalk. Her fingers were icy as she plunged them into her pockets for the keys. When she had closed the door the shivering began, which startled her because she should have been hot and a bit out of breath. No one was home yet, and Dina ran to the basement, and after she had stripped every piece of clothing off she threw a pile of freshly washed towels on herself. She lay on the carpeted floor covered in clean laundry slowly becoming human again, wishing the cold away. If this was only late spring, what was winter like?

When she felt better, she got up to get some clothes and cook sinigang. She made sure the soup was very sour, the way she and her mother liked it. She used the powdered mix in the pantry and added a lot of tomatoes. She had downed a bowl of the hot, hot broth when her sisters got home.

"Did you get caught in the rain?" Beth looked her up and down. Juliet eyed the wet prints of her feet on the carpet.

Dina nodded sheepishly.

"Ay naku, that's how it is here. It's not the rain that kills you, it's the wind!"

"The first time I got rained on I got sick," Juliet said.

Beth rummaged in a closet by the stairs and came back with a gray length of cloth. In Dina's fingers it felt as if it had been cut from a sweater.

"Bring the scarf with you everywhere, ha? Especially you since you're not used

to it here yet. And an umbrella."

Juliet nodded. "You'll get used to the cold. Your body will adjust, don't worry."

It seemed awfully unlikely.

"It took me three winters to really adjust. Now I love the cold."

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In her first week there her sisters had taken her places every day. The Distillery District. Casa Loma. The zoo.

"The next time you're here we can go to Quebec City."

"Yes! It's beautiful. An old city, a lot like Intramuros but nicer. Better preserved."

The second week she was on her own. Beth had returned to the condo overlooking the harbor where she cared for a man in his eighties, and Juliet returned to her post as a clerk in a financial services company near Rogers Center (she admitted to never having watched the Blue Jays or Raptors), both places a short walk from Union Station. Dina spent hours and hours on the Waterfront Trail and sat on benches to look out at Lake Ontario. Such a luxury for her sisters to have something like this so close to where they lived. This time of year the lake is lovely, her sisters had told her, and it was. She walked the trail slowly, bikers and rollerbladers whizzing past her. The water called out to her, telling her this was where she belonged. She thought of Biboy, and how he would enjoy wasting afternoons here.

At the end of that second week he had more strangeness to relate.

"Mama, I followed Yaya out of the room last night when she left." He was almost breathless with anxiety. "I was very quiet. I waited outside the bathroom downstairs, but she took a very long time. I almost fell asleep on the stairs. And there was this foul smell coming from the bathroom."

"It's a bathroom, anak. If she used the toilet, of course the smell will be bad."

"No, Mama! I know that smell, and this wasn't like that. It was like rotting meat!

The kind that's been left in the sun. Like those dead cats on the street."

"Biboy, stop talking like that about Yaya. Bastos."

"But I'm scared, Mama."

Yolly was her cheerful self just a few moments later. "I think it was food poisoning, Ma'am Dina. I was on the toilet for a while. Naku, ma'am, I thought my innards were coming out. But after midnight it was okay, and I ate some bread."

Again Dina found herself mouthing apologies. "I never even taught Biboy about aswang and tikbalang and all that."

"He has books with pictures. And he watches videos on the internet."

"I'm so sorry he's like this, Yaya. Please be patient, he's just a boy. Pasensya na."

"It's no problem at all, ma'am. He's a growing boy. He'll do something great with his crazy imaginings some day."

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Maybe she was indeed getting to used to living here. She'd intended on only two weeks, but her sisters had managed to get her to extend her stay. As she entered her third week, her body had become comfortable. The jet lag disappeared quickly, in maybe two days. Now the rhythm of this world felt like the most natural thing, as if it was also hers now. During that first week she asked herself if she could ever live here. Now the answer was obvious. Then came a thought that surprised her: could she get used to her old routine once she got back home? Waking on her narrow bed, the sound of a distant radio, the snarl of tricycles and jeepneys, the chatter and yelps of the many people in the household, the noise of multitudes everywhere she went getting on with the business of living. Did she want to endure all that again? But there was no need to consider it just yet. Enjoy the last days here.

"The days are long right now. Look, it's eight o'clock and there's still daylight." It was a Saturday, and they were walking on a trail beside the lake. The grass was lacquered a greenish bronze. "But in winter, watch out! The sun goes down at four

o'clock, sometimes three. We leave the house it's dark, when I leave the office it's dark. Days can go by without you seeing the sun. It can be hard."

It can be hard, they kept saying. Dina understood now that this was their way of understating the struggle to adjust to this land, to its extremes of weather that life back home didn't prepare you for. To not having any househelp. To the funny coins and the paper money that felt like sheets of plastic. To the strange food, like the bagels they ate at Union Square as they waited for the subway train, the Pinay shopkeepers haughty and cold. To not be noticed when you stood next to a white person at a shop, to have the woman ringing up the groceries pleasant to everyone else but stone-faced to you.

Still, it was better here, they insisted. All you need to do is adjust. Learn to deal with things. Then all will be well. And we Pinoys are very good at adjusting.

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At the end of the third week came the most alarming call.

"I'm sorry but I haven't been well in a week." Yolly's voice was thin, almost tremulous.

"Biboy said you were drooling blood."

"No, ma'am," she said, trying to laugh. "I slipped and banged my face against a door. My lips bled for a while, and I had a cut on my forehead. And I had to lie down for the whole day because my head was spinning."

"You should have gone to a hospital, Ya!"

"Ah, no, no need. It will only make everyone worry. Especially Marilu. And you. I'm much better now."

Dina considered how serious the injury might be. Perhaps a concussion? Something just as bad? But how much would treatment cost? Dina scoffed at herself. Surely Yolly's health was worth the cost. Then she felt, with some shame, that it was better this way.

"Please take care of yourself, Yolly." Then she added, with no conviction, "If it gets worse, go to a doctor. I'll take care of it."

"Thank you, ma'am. I just have to be more careful walking around in the dark." Then she added, with a chuckle, "Or else Biboy might think I really am turning into an aswang."

If she were living here she could afford treatment, no problem. But then Dina wouldn't be able to afford having someone like Yolly around. Kanya-kanya dito, her sisters had said, bahala ka sa buhay mo. You're on your own.

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"Biboy, what do you think of living in Canada?"

There was silence. She'd been away from him for nearly a month, and she would need to go home soon. Her paid leave had run out (her supervisor had sent her a pleasant but curt message), and she didn't wish to be a burden on her sisters any longer.

"You don't have to give me an answer now. Just think about it. But we can live here. It's very nice. Very, very nice. We can live with Tita Beth and Tita Juliet. They have a house just outside Toronto. Very cozy."

More silence.

"It's beautiful. A lot of grass. And trees. You'll love just walking around. And you can bike to many places."

"Okay," he said, sounding not curious but being polite.

"I will find work as a teacher here. I will buy you nice things. We will have a good life. Maybe not right away. But it will happen."

"Don't we have a good life here?"

He doesn't understand.

"It will be better here. No traffic. Clean air and streets."

"I don't know anyone there."

"You know Tita Beth and Juliet, yes? You met them already."

"I don't remember."

"You did. But it's okay, you will meet more people at school and you will make friends. You're good at making friends."

Maybe she was going at it too hard. Just plant the seed in his mind, and he'll come around. Besides, she didn't really need his approval to make the decision. Of course it would affect him. It would turn his world upside down, in fact. No friends here. English used everywhere. All the signs in English and French, even on the packaging. But he was young. It would be easy for him to learn. Why, in no time at all his French might be so much better than hers that he would be able to go to Montreal or Quebec City without her. The old city could be the site of their first vacation.

"Will Yaya Yolly be able to fly there and drink my blood?"

Dear God. She felt like snapping at him, but she bit her tongue. If they moved here, he would have some growing up to do. All these silly ideas, it was insulting to Yolly. It was to the woman's great credit that she took it all in stride, but it was disrespectful. He would have to leave these childish things behind. As she did when she had him.

"No, she won't. It's too far. No aswang here in Canada. I promise."

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Marilu's face filled the laptop screen, and her voice traveled from halfway around the world to come out on Juliet's powered speakers. Dina never stopped being awed by the inventiveness of humankind.

"That woman is getting old, Dins," Marilu said of Yolly, as if she spoke of someone who didn't live in her house, who hadn't brought up her children.

"She can't do everything like she used to. We got a washing machine because she

can't do the washing anymore. And she barely cooks now. Which is fine, because she overcooks everything."

Beth turned to Juliet. "Remember when she overcooked the steaks?"

"Sirloins."

"A gift from someone."

"And she almost burned them! Barely edible. Sayang."

"Well," Marilu said, "I and my panganay Angie do most of it now."

Why hadn't Dina noticed these things? Yes, Yolly looked older, had become a little stooped. She didn't have the energy she used to have as a young woman. And a fine cook she certainly was not. But mostly she had warm feelings for her. It was a bit of a shock to hear her cousin and sisters talk of her as if she were some burden they were figuring out a way to cast off.

"At least you know she won't steal," Beth said, and the others nodded. "That's the best thing about her."

"Unlike the young ones now. Naku, they'll steal your clothes from the wash."

"They'll tell you they're going home for a vacation and will be back in two weeks."

"So of course they won't."

"And they borrow money from you before leaving." Laughter.

"She mostly just looks after the kids these days," Marilu said. "And that's really just Biboy."

They looked at her in a way that told Dina she too was some kind of burden they were thinking of a way to cast off.

"Marilu, why don't you come over? Maganda dito."

"Hay naku. Edward is looking at Australia. He says we will decide in three years. He's been passed over for promotion so many times now. So maybe Melbourne, with Tita Glenda. If we get lucky."

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"What was Mama like before she died?" Her three weeks were over, and she would fly out the next day. Dina realized that in all this time her sisters had barely spoken of their mother.

Beth spoke first. "Okay naman. She was lucid most of the time. She couldn't go to the Toronto library anymore, where she liked to help out. She liked walking around the neighborhood. She would stop at her favorite spots to look at trees or flowers or just feel the sun on her face. When she couldn't do it anymore we would push her around in her wheelchair. She'd made friends with some of the neighbors who'd greet her as we passed by. Weekends we took her to the trail to look at Lake Ontario. That was her favorite thing to do when she couldn't do much anymore."

"She wanted to eat only Filipino food." Juliet threw up her arms. "So every day we had to find things from the few Filipino stores. We even went all the way to Cabbagetown. Sinigang and adobong manok and ginataang tilapia. Anything with gata. And you know you can't get coconut cream fresh here; it's all canned. Binagoongan. She devoured anything with bagoong. Mais con hielo and halo-halo, especially on warm days. That's why we got a blender that can shave ice."

"Did she want to visit the country one last time?"

"No, not at all."

"But she said she wanted to see you."

"It was funny because she used to say you were the stupidest among us because you stayed in Manila. She would call you 'iyang kapatid ninyong tanga' especially after you got pregnant. Or 'iyang gagang iyan.' But when she was near the end she said she wanted to see you. She wanted to see you one more time."

"I didn't know."

"You were busy. You were raising Biboy."

"You were her favorite. All I heard growing up was how terrible I was in school, at everything, why couldn't I be more like Dina?"

"And then you got pregnant, and I thought, serves her right. Buti nga."

Beth, her sister who had just turned forty-two, had never had a man as far as Dina knew. When Dina had asked why they hadn't married, Beth snapped and said what for? A man needs a woman to take care of him, but why does a woman need a man? Juliet said they did very well taking care of themselves.

"She never stopped favoring you. Even when she was here, and we were taking care of her and spending for everything and she was dying, she kept talking about you."

"When she wasn't cursing the cold."

"I should have come here earlier." Dina thought of trips she shouldn't have taken, days at the mall with friends she shouldn't have gone on, things she needn't have bought, how much money she could have saved.

"You didn't."

"It's over now. Nothing to be done about it."

Dina finished her packing that night then went to bed with the thought that her mother had wanted to see her before she died, and her sisters had not tried to make it happen, had not even told her about it. As she fell asleep the house whispered to her that she would never be welcome there, not really, not as one of them. And she would be vulnerable if she had Biboy with her. Stay away, don't come back, it said. Softly, again and again, as she drifted off to sleep, stay away, don't come back.

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She sat in a lounge looking out a wall of windows at the hulking planes on the tarmac of Narita Airport. She had eaten a modest but colorful plate of sushi, one of the treats she would stop allowing herself now that her vacation was coming to a close, and she let the coffee in her hands warm her bones.

In the time she had left before boarding she turned over the events of the past three weeks in her head. Beth and Juliet never went out. When she went sightseeing

and they accompanied her they looked as if they were there for the first time just like her. Trying not to look awed, not turning to attendants for help, so Dina had to be the one to ask for directions. Yet looking relieved when they drank their beers afterwards. Pretending to consider buying the expensive scarf. Driving a fifteen-year-old car. The heater kept breaking down, they said, so they had to scrape ice off the windows in winter. None of their clothes were new, and they often didn't match. Did they buy them at discount stores? They ate out almost every day during her first week, then never after that. At least the house was nice. But now she wondered, was it even theirs, as they claimed?

They talked a lot about how awful their jobs were. Their terrible bosses. Beth's was a younger woman with red hair, who sneered at her behind a glossy smile. Juliet's supervisor was black, and somehow she hated him more for it. But they reserved their most potent venom for their fellow Pinoys. The group of Ilocanos who gathered at Morningside Park in Scarborough selling pinakbet and dinakdakan. "They always smell of fried pork and bagoong." Dina had bought food from them one Sunday, and she made sure to finish it all, together with steamed rice, at the park, the food was so much salty-meaty goodness, after which she sprayed cologne on herself to make sure she wouldn't smell of it. They stopped going to the big churches in Toronto, partly because of Mama, but mostly because there were "too many Pinoys." Instead they made the short drive to St Boniface or St Barnabas, small and pretty churches with smaller crowds. They hated being with them and their haughtiness, their competitiveness, their gossip.

Were their lives really as good as they said they were? Or were they making it look better, to somehow convince Dina to come over? And of course if she did there would be no going back. She would be stuck with her lying sisters. But maybe they weren't lying at all, just believing their lives were better than they really were.

A horrible thought came to her: they were setting her up to use her. After

attending to her hand and foot for a week Dina had repaid the favor by doing most of the household tasks, which her sisters accepted with magnanimity. Dina didn't mind as she was staying with them rent-free. What if this was the plan, to have her take care of them as they aged, as they turned into the bitter spinsters they were already becoming, and having her shackled to them, with no choice but to stay and serve? She wouldn't have a choice, not if she was sending Biboy to school and supporting him.

Just then a plane moved and slowly turned its nose toward the runway. Each plane was here only briefly, then it was off to a new country, a different continent, a different climate, some far corner of the planet she would never see. How easy human beings had made traveling the world seem. Why couldn't she simply take wing and fly off if she wanted to, if it was really necessary? But could she, with Biboy? What if she left him behind? Something inside her turned cold. Surely it wouldn't come to that. She would never have to make that choice.

She made one last call to Manila.

"I opened the door and heard the flapping of wings. I went to the window. I saw a huge bird flying away. I looked at her bed. Yolly was still there. Then I realized she wasn't an aswang. She had been possessed by one. Now it was gone."

"An aswang isn't a spirit. It doesn't possess people."

"This one did. Yolly was asleep, peaceful. I left her there."

"I'll see you in a few hours, anak. I can't wait to hug you. Love you."

When she landed and turned on her phone the messages came pouring in. Yolly found unconscious in her room. Yolly brought to the hospital by Marilu and her daughter. By the time Dina got there she was dead.

"Concussions. The doctor said she had had a series of them. She must have been in pain, but she never said anything. She would ask me for Tylenol for headaches but that was all." Marilu sounded sad but not shaken. And Dina knew she would be

fine, Yolly no longer meant anything to her, she would be relieved to not have her in her life anymore. She had journeyed from a cold land back to another one.

Dina sent money sent to Yolly's family in Bohol, with contributions from everyone in the compound plus something from Beth and Juliet. A niece and nephew came to gather Yolly's meager belongings. The family had bought a farm and piggery with the money Yolly had sent home over the years, they said, and a few tricycles too, and the income had made it possible to send the young ones to school, and they all cried when they heard the news that their kindly aunt was dead.

Dina had no reason to believe it, but in their voices she heard relief. The money she sent was no longer needed but received and put to use anyway, with little gratitude. Serving this family in Manila had allowed Yolly's immediate relations to thrive, and the money she sent was eventually a pittance compared to the incomes they were generating. Yet they never told her to stop. And she continued to work as she got older and weaker. Her death was merely a reminder of a time in their lives that had already ended and which they had moved on from. Now the inconvenience of her life was gone, and everyone breathed easier.

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And so it happened that Dina returned to her place in the compound, shared in the cooking and cleaning and washing of clothes. Very quickly it was as if Yolly had never existed, had never tended to them with a headstrong devotion.

Dina worked herself to the bone and was able to send Biboy to Melbourne, to study there and stay with Tita Glenda. He outgrew his interest in creatures from folktales, studied finance, and found gainful employment in a bank. He found a pretty wife, started a family, and lived in a quiet suburb outside Melbourne and sent home enough money as to make it unnecessary for Dina to work. She retired early.

She herself had married. Her husband was a decent man, someone she met at work. She had been wary of the sweet idiocy of romance, having fallen prey to it

once before, and having resolved never to love beyond the limits of her duty, she had chosen a man who was kind, responsible, and sensible with not an ounce of greatness in him. They produced no offspring, for which she was glad. By the time she retired they had moved to a modest home on the outskirts of the metropolis, a place where she could wake up to sunshine and birdsong, not the yammering of untempered voices or the roar and snarl of motor traffic.

One night late in her life, when her husband had been dead five years, and her relatives asked her constantly to consider moving in with them, wasn't it a bad idea to live old and alone, which made her remember her yaya withering away and dying in a house full of people who should have cared for her, she was visited by a small dark figure outside the window. Its grotesque form repulsed her, yet she found it quite familiar. She had known in her heart of hearts that this day would come. A voice in her head said, very clearly, It is time.

She rose from her bed feebly and took slow wobbly steps to the window. She opened it wide and raised a foot to the sill, then the other, surprising herself with the suppleness of her movement. A brief but excruciating convulsion rippled through her body, nearly splitting her in two, and when the pain was gone she felt something damp and thick protrude from her back. For a moment she took in the dark and sleeping world in front of her. Then her companion took her hand and nodded, and she leapt. They were off, their gray and regal wings outstretched, and they rose in the sky, the world growing small beneath them. She felt weightless and young and powerful.

She thought she saw the old compound in Cubao, one corner torn down and rebuilt for new families. Then ocean, broad swathes of it, shimmering like a jewel. Then the bleak majesty of ice, mountains of it. Then terrain of brown and green. They flew from darkness into daylight into darkness. They climbed until the air grew thin and she thought she would lose her breath. Once in a while she saw

beside them a plane, airborne with its noisy, massive engines, and she pitied the people inside who were looking out at the great world through pinholes of light, who needed such crude machines to fly. They swooped low enough to hear the chatter in the streets, to peer into rooms and smell the unhurried but certain shriveling of human lives. What a pity these humans were, living together so closely yet unable to see each other for what they were.

Then she thought she saw the house outside Toronto, a light in a window on a cold night, her sisters, their bodies frail and withered, sitting quietly in the living room. The wind had grown icy cold, like that time she was caught in the rain in that city, and her skin felt as if it was aflame. Then they were over the main road, she had forgotten its name, glittering like a long, bright runway, and she remembered what her sisters said about it, that it was actually a highway, a very long one, that ran for miles and miles north, then turned west for even longer, though most people assumed it simply went north forever, they never saw the end of it. She followed the curve of the street, then past it, then she was over the ocean again, the slow fire of day on the horizon. Her companion had taken leave of her long before, and she knew what she had to do.

She was weary now, but with a mighty effort she climbed to a great height, higher than ever, let go of a laugh that turned into a brilliant cackle, then fell, flying faster and faster, feeling her body begin to tear against the wind, to combust, to burst into glorious flame, and she welcomed the sight of the ocean, getting nearer and nearer, the dark water that had birthed her, that had called to her, and to which her ashes returned.