ZURBARAN

The first touch of the silk handkerchief startled Carina. To find something so openly luxurious and frivolous, so flimsy and unsuited for the purpose of handkerchiefs, which was to blow one's nose or to soak up sweat, in the stark plainness of their home was entirely unaccustomed and so unexpected that it excited her, like finding out the forbidden. Not that the forbidden was anything familiar. Carina attended a convent school near their house. Her class was being readied for their first Holy Confession prior to their First Holy Communion and finding sins to confess was a problem. The silk handkerchief was proof of self-indulgence and capriciousness, bordering on sin, and of the existence of a world vastly different from the one that she was used to.

She had found the handkerchief in Adelfa's laundry basket of ironing. She had taken it when Adelfa wasn't looking, but this wasn't stealing because it belonged to her father after all. To her way of thinking, somehow the blood relationship between her and her parents, the love that they had for her, and the consequent property rights emanating from this, extended to the contents of all furnishings, receptacles and other worldly goods, such as their refrigerator, their pots and dishes, and even her parents' desks, closets, bureau drawers. In other words, she had an inherent right to all of her parents' household and personal effects, and she now exercised this right by appropriating this superfluous piece of silk.

Carina liked to watch Adelfa at work because she sang, high pitched, twisting lugubrious songs faithfully mimicked from the contestants on the TV talent shows.

Adelfa was barely educated. When she was just seven years old, the same age as Carina, Adelfa's teacher at the Maasin Elementary School in Leyte, had decided that she was too stupid and not worth the trouble of schooling. She had made Adelfa sweep the classroom before classes started, then go to the teacher's house which was just a ten minute walk away, to look after her baby and to cook rice. Adelfa didn't mind because the teacher always had ready for her, a *pan de sal* with watery coffee when she arrived in the morning, and even let her eat lunch with her and her family. That was the only pay she ever got but then she was used to hard work even on an empty stomach. "*Bata pa ako, kayod kalabaw na,* (Ever since I was so high, I worked like a dog)," Adelfa bragged to Carina, showing off her sinewy forearms, Popeye the sailorman style.

When Adelfa's parents found out that she was not actually attending classes but was the teacher's unpaid servant, they pulled her out of school and put her to work in the fields with her brothers. If anyone was going to benefit from her labors, then it should be her own family. Adelfa showed Carina a round white scar, as big as a peso, on her shin where the heavy *bolo* she had wielded to help her parents clear a field, had slipped and sliced her nearly to the bone.

"I have the moon on my leg and nothing in my head," Adelfa teased Carina who was always the first in her class. They watched noontime variety shows on TV together. She tried to get Carina to imitate the dancers bobbing and grinding in wild abandon, but the child refused to follow her. Carina didn't care to entertain others by thrusting her pudendum back and forth or wiggling her backside salaciously. During the office Christmas parties which her parents took her and her older sister Rebecca along to, she

watched with grave dispassion while the grown-up's had games that involved men tying eggplants around their waists and thrusting these back and forth while attempting to get the tip into a cup held by an embarrassed female co-worker. The ones with the lewdest moves were the most applauded. Carina did not appreciate either the shrill laughter, or the frenzied screams as the couples in the newspaper dance rubbed their hindquarters against each other in a dizzily overheated frisson when they were squeezed onto the tiniest square of newsprint on the dance floor that it was possible to get four toeholds on. The games they played were in the same overwrought and hysterical vein as the games on the lunchtime TV shows. Often there were students in the audience, as entire grade levels in the public schools were taken to these as part of their educational field trips.

When Adelfa was done with her work in the afternoons and Carina was home from school, they watched more TV together. Adelfa did not understand most of the English dialogue but focused intently on the images and the stunts during action scenes, and constantly reminded Carina: "That was just a camera trick." Adelfa was certain that everything marvelous was formed from trickery and deceit. As she was practically illiterate, she had learned the hard way how easy it was to be fooled. Carina politely received such nuggets of wisdom from their devoted *lavandera*, although inwardly she wondered why anyone in their right mind would even think they could fly like Superman or walk through walls like the Invisible Man. How could anyone trust TV over what one's own senses revealed?

Adelfa had left Maasin, Leyte when she was just fifteen to come to Manila with a labor recruiter. She had worked with their family ever since the eldest daughter Rebecca was only an infant. Carina's mother had tried to get Adelfa to enroll in the evening high school at Lourdes Church but Adelfa said she was too tired after working all day and would rather relax by watching TV. She knew the denominations on money and what was the correct change due her. She could recognize the configurations of place names on jeepneys and some street signs and that was enough. As for voting, she didn't see the point of that. She could now print her first name but lacked the confidence to open a bank account. She kept all her paper money in an old Almond Roca tin, beneath *estampitas*, hairclips, earrings, buttons and rolls of used gift wrapping ribbon. Her coins were in a miniature jukebox that was really a piggy bank, a gift from a relative working in Hongkong. Every Christmas, she let Rebecca and Carina have the coins.

Carina liked being in Adelfa's tiny room where all her treasures were literally within arm's reach, either under her bed or in the wooden cabinet that was flush against it. The radio played while she worked. They didn't have a washing machine in those days, so Adelfa spent many hours, sitting on her haunches and bent over huge basins of laundry with the water noisily splattering in staccato contrapunto to her early morning radio drama shows. When the laundry had dried, Adelfa would drape a white gauze diaper over her head then clap a wide-brimmed straw hat on, to protect her from the fierce afternoon sun. She sang soaringly of sorrow and failed love as she took the clothes off the line. She alternated her days between washing and ironing to spare her

hands from *pasma.* Carina liked ironing days best of all for warm clean sweet smell that rose from the newly pressed clothes. But this sweetness was fleeting and did not stay for long inside the closets when the clothes had been put away.

One of the secrets that Carina and Adelfa shared was the existence of her boyfriend Oscar. He had come by a few times to pick Adelfa up on her days off. Once Carina saw them together, lying fully clothed on Adelfa's narrow cot. Their heads, each with an arm pillowed beneath, leaned towards each other but their faces were raised to the ceiling as they gazed upon a common vision among the cobwebs and peeling paint above them. They murmured softly to each other in Waray. Oscar was a jeepney driver and was rumored to be married with children in Palo, which was why Adelfa could not introduce him to Carina's parents. He was not her first boyfriend. They would have scolded her for carrying on again with a married man.

"If you are legally married, you and your children can inherit from your husband when he is gone," her father had loftily explained to Adelfa why she should be more discriminating about whom she consorted with when they first found out that a previous boyfriend had two wives.

"*Kuya*, he really has nothing to leave to anyone. *Isang kahig, isang tuka,*" Adelfa had shrugged. "He is so poor but he is such a good man deep down inside."

Oscar brought Adelfa fat foil wrapped chocolates, studded with *pinipig*, not by the box but by the piece, three at a time which Adelfa said stood for "I love you." She always let Carina have one because she reminded her that she loved her even more than she loved Oscar who was just another man.

"You don't remember, but when you were a baby and you always had colic, we would all have to take turns rocking you just to make you stop crying. So even if my arms were aching from ironing or washing all afternoon, I would carry you and dance you around too, so you would feel better. Oh how I suffered for you, all because I love you, baby."

Carina's father never missed the silk handkerchief and it never occurred to Carina that if he had looked for it, her purloining that scrap of fabric might have gotten Adelfa in trouble. It must have been a present because she knew that her parents would never buy anything so impractical. Her father's handkerchiefs were mostly white monogrammed muslin squares, upon which he would not hesitate to blow his nose. He was a lawyer and preferred to appear in court wearing an *Americana* as he believed that judges respected neat tailoring more than rumpled *barong*. His dark woolen suits had a sober utilitarian sameness, just like uniforms or religious habits. Adelfa did not launder these bespoke suits. They went to the dry cleaners.

When her father wanted to buy something from the street vendors, he would take off his tie and drape his jacket over the backseat of his car. He didn't want the vendors to know he was someone who worked in a suit so that he could haggle with them. The driver Mang Fred would meet him on the next street while her father made his way in shiny leather shoes, gingerly maneuvering around matted piles of trash and dried sewage that floated up to the surfaces of the city streets every time it flooded. After a heavy rain, it was as if the city had regurgitated the detritus and dregs from its deepest bowels and crevasses. The pure waters that poured from the heavens did not

flush away the filth but rather dredged it from beneath the pockmarked and grimy concrete surfaces.

Carina kept the scrap of silk in the skirt pocket of her school uniform where she could touch it even while in class. The silk handkerchief was further evidence of her father's appearing as other than himself. At home, he walked around in old boxer shorts and white undershirts so worn out, that the necklines sank and rippled like cottony cloud trails along his boney chest. Besides, she liked the way the handkerchief felt as she rubbed it against her cheek before she slept.

Their home had a puritanical austerity and lack of ornamentation that was a testimony to her parents' reliance on meritorious hard work. When her teacher asked the first grade class to draw their family altar, Carina was nonplussed as their home had neither plaster statues nor pictures of Jesus or any of his family and the lesser pantheon of saints. She copied from her seatmate's drawing. Later she asked her parents why they did not have a family altar. They shrugged. It was unimportant. Carina felt vaguely scandalized at her family's lack of conformity in this regard.

On Sundays, when the driver was off and her father had to drive them to church, he sat outside and read the paper until Carina, Rebecca and their mother emerged. Then one of her father's clients who had gone on a pilgrimage to Rome, gave her parents a signed and framed picture of the Pope which they hung in their library. The Pope wore a red cape, a tall ornate hat, a heavy gold necklace and an enormous ring with a gemstone. Carina's mother did not wear red because their father said it was loud and vulgar and cried for attention, and here was the Pope, an elderly man in such a blaze of

glory. She thought of other men in capes: Elton John, Liberace, Mandrake the Magician, Dracula and the Count on Sesame Street. She was uncertain just what to make of the Pope, but decided that he had a kind face which made up for his fashion excesses and lack of taste.

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Her parents didn't know that Adelfa took Carina along with her when she visited friends while they were away at work. Carina had never been in houses before, like those where Adelfa's friends lived. Here families slept and ate all together in one room and children, smaller than her, cooked rice and fried fish. She was intrigued at how their belongings all fit in such little spaces. Their clothes, neatly folded in old boxes or hanging in plastic garment bags, were so close to them, she imagined that these stayed warm even when unworn, radiated by the heat of their owners' bodies, all clumped together like an elliptical sun of flesh. The baby's rattan cradle, hanging over the sleeping platform where all the rest of the family lay side by side, was a tiny planet in their compact little galaxy. She admired the tricks the school children in these one room houses had, such as wrapping a thick wad of paper on a pencil stub to make it longer so that its usefulness might likewise be extended, or using a fingertip wet with saliva as an eraser.

One day Adelfa's sister Leonidas who lived all the way in Sapang Palay, came to visit them with her daughter Zenaida who was just a year older than Carina. They stood the little girls back to back to compare their heights. Carina was two inches taller than Zenaida.

"Maybe it's because Carina still drinks milk," Leonidas sighed that Zenaida had not had milk since she had weaned her so many years ago. Only the baby got to drink milk but this was just condensed milk, not actual infant formula, as that was all that they could afford. Leonidas had three more children after Zenaida, one of whom had died and her breast milk had long since dried up. Some days there was not even condensed milk, so the baby had to be content with the rice washings called *am* with a little sugar. Carina hated milk and offered to give Zenaida and her two younger siblings all that was in their refrigerator. She didn't understand why not having it should be such a loss. She always tried to get away with not drinking her milk at breakfast, and would slip off to school, leaving several inches still in her glass. Then one morning after prayers, Miss Cardillo their homeroom teacher had loudly called out her name, and with arms akimbo, had motioned her by pointing her pursed lips towards the corridor. The family cook Lita, was standing there with the glass of milk that Carina had deliberately left untouched at the breakfast table. Her classmates had whispered and smirked at her discomfiture as she had to stand out in the corridor and drink her glass of milk while Miss Cardillo watched her from the classroom doorway.

During Leonidas's and Zenaida's visit, Carina decided to practice the piano by playing a pared down and greatly simplified version of Offenbach's Barcarolle from her Michael Aaron book. Zenaida had stood at the corner of the old upright, smilingly watching her, and shyly but soundlessly brushing the rightmost keys with her fingertips.

"Now you play," said Carina, getting off the bench and nodding for Zenaida to take her place. Zenaida giggled, sat down and playfully pounded the full length of the keyboard with both balled up fists.

"No, not that way. You have to read the music," Carina was shocked that anyone would treat an instrument with such disrespect.

Zenaida just giggled harder and said, "I don't know how to read."

"But don't you practice the piano at home?" Carina persisted. "Don't you take lessons in your school's music department after classes?"

"We don't have a piano at home," Zenaida replied. "I am not going to school now. Mama said maybe next year I can go if Papa gets a job."

This gave Carina pause. Zenaida was just like her aunt Adelfa in not being able to go to school but Adelfa had been a little girl in a faraway province, several years ago, while here was Zenaida, living not too far from Metro-Manila where there were so many schools. But as for parents who had no jobs, she had never really thought about that. She was so used to seeing both of hers going to the office, and even working at the desks beside their bed, far into the night when they thought she was already asleep. Adelfa produced a bag of groceries for Leonidas to bring home before they left. Carina insisted that Zenaida take all the milk too. While this was going on, Lita the cook rolled her eyes and banged her pots and pans meaningfully, but held her peace at Adelfa's stony glance. They both had their secrets. Lita's own nephews would also came by and leave bearing mysterious packages, and they all knew that Mang Fred sometimes spent the night in Lita's room even if he was married with five children in Bacoor, Cavite.

Carina did not understand the significance of men and women staying in the same rooms and thought that it was just the order of things in the same way that there were only girls in her school, except for the janitors, the gardeners, the drivers and the occasional visiting priest. It must be for similar reasons that her parents wanted the help to stay in their own rooms. When she was very young, her *yaya* had slept in the bed with her but now she was old enough to share a room with Rebecca. The servants' quarters were outside the main house because in recent years, there had been stories in the news of maids letting robbers into their master's homes while the family slept, or sullen houseboys turning upon their employers and murdering them.

Once when it was Mang Fred's day off and their father was driving them all to a wedding, a thick mass of cables suddenly crashed down upon the roof of their car as they wended their way through a crowded narrow inner street in Cubao, to the highway that would take them to Makati. Immediately, they were surrounded by a throng of half-naked men and capering boys, the jobless denizens of a squatter colony that bordered the highway. They were not there to help, but were all eager to witness firsthand what they hoped would be a spectacularly violent disaster and were all yelling excitedly, "*Sasabog na! Masusunog na!* (They're gonna blow up! They're all gonna burn!)" None of the boisterous onlookers touched the car but got as near as they could to gawk at Carina and her family through the windows, especially at their mother, who was looking very chic in a silk coral cocktail sheath, with her hair done up to show off her South Sea pearl earrings. Their father was in his shirt sleeves as he had

taken off his jacket while he was driving and draped this on the backseat between Rebecca and Carina.

"Girls, don't touch anything. Get away from the doors and move to the middle of the seat," their mother ordered.

"But we'll be sitting on Daddy's suit coat," Rebecca protested.

"That's all right. Just don't touch the doors."

Then their father said, "These don't look like live electric wires. They look like well- insulated telephone cables." Slowly, he inched the car forward against the stubbornly resisting male horde who were hoping that any time now, the little family in their Japanese sedan would be incinerated or explode into bloody bits. Gradually they moved out from beneath the load of fallen cables which slid off the car roof and dropped heavily to the asphalt, while the hopeful crowd scampered away to prevent any of the wires from touching their feet. With a burst of speed, they emerged into the highway, leaving behind the disappointed mass who had been deprived of the spectacle of their public demise.

"Daddy, those squatters wanted to see us burn and die," Rebecca declared.

"Well you know, maybe they don't have television," their father lightly said.

"They're so mean. I hope they all die," Rebecca quivered with rage.

"We will all die, *hija,*" their father said. "It's just a matter of when, where and how."

"I want them all to suffer and die the most terrible deaths," Rebecca as the eldest was used to getting her way and was rather strong willed. She was terribly offended at their having been a source of entertainment for Cubao's urban poor.

"For most of them, I would think life is already a living hell," their father grimly noted.

"Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do," their mother intoned. Although they still did not have a family altar, she had signed them up for the block rosary. A little image of the Virgin of the La Naval in a glass case with a turned wood frame, had stayed in their house for nine days. During this period, she had assembled the girls and their servants every evening at six, to pray the rosary in the living room where the Virgin had a place of honor on top of the piano. They said the rosary in English which only Lita the cook could follow. Adelfa made humming noises in approximation of the prayers and Mang Fred moved his lips silently. All the lights were switched off as they prayed by candlelight which cast pretty flickering shadows of the Virgin's eyelashes on her painted polymer cheeks. Their father never joined them. He preferred to read or to watch TV.

Some months after their unrealized death by conflagration, their mother got a call from her aunt in Rancho Cucamonga, California, asking her to send her embroidered *pina kimonos* and ramie tablecloths from the Central Market in Zurbaran through a visiting *balikbayan* friend who would be flying back to the States the following week.

"I'll take you with me to Zurbaran. They have good *halo-halo* there," their mother told them. Rebecca did not like *halo-halo* so only Carina went along. The market was a dark squat sprawl whose roof undulated with curled rusting corrugated metal sheets and blue tarpaulin patches where the panels must have been blown away by any of the dozen or so typhoons that raged across Manila in the passing of every year. Carina's mother held her hand tightly as they made their way through the narrow aisles between the market stalls, in the native dry goods section. Ilocano *abel* blankets, mosquito nets, dish towels and bedspreads where you could have your names worked into the weave towered on either side. Lines of hanging abaca purses and *nito* baskets stretched across the ceilings of other stalls. Tiny white shells formed tiered chandeliers while other shellfish limned pictures of palm fronds, rice fields and herons on slender bamboo legs. Shiny coconuts were transformed into comical monkeys or cut into soup bowl and salad service sets.

Finally her mother found the stalls selling embroidered Filipino costumes and went from one to another, comparing the fineness of the embroidery and the prices. By then, Carina was dizzy from the press of goods and strangers, with all their array of odors. Stifling heat radiated from the huge bright light bulbs above and mingled with more heat seeping from the pitted cement floor that had turned dark from the mud and grime of decades of footprints. She leaned weakly against a pile of plastic wrapped *polo barong* at the stall where her mother was still haggling, and closed her eyes.

"*Ate*, Carina looks ill," said Mang Fred who had followed them to carry back any bundles they might have, as he had to park the car at quite a distance from the market. Her mother hurriedly made her choices and paid.

"Mang Fred, I'll take the packages but you please carry Carina. I don't think she can walk all the way back to the car."

But Carina refused to be carried. She clutched her mother's hand to her cheek, and walked beside her, while half leaning against her hip. At the *carinderia* section, her mother stopped and lifted her onto a stool.

"Let's sit down here, and rest a bit. A cold drink might help you to feel better."

"A Coke please," Carina quickly whispered since it was so seldom that she and Rebecca had sodas. As she sipped slowly, savoring the sweet dark bubbles, she observed the people sitting on benches at trestle type tables covered with torn plastic. They looked like laborers, carpenters, sales girls, drivers—all people who worked hard to earn the few pesos to buy each meal that would tide them over till the next. *Isang kahig, isang tuka,* as she had heard Adelfa describe it. Now among the workers hunched over their precious mounds of rice edged with tiny puddles of *atsuete*-tinted gravy wherein floated sparse threads of meat or shallow bowls of *sinigang*, she saw what might be called a pair of human chickens or rather a mother hen and her chick. Moving as unobtrusively as possible between the tables and benches were a painfully emaciated and sunburned woman and her equally spindly child. Their matted hair and their clothes that were soiled and stiff with filth showed that they lived where there were no bathing or washing facilities. They each held a small clear plastic bag. Before the plates

were cleared from a table, the mother and child would hurriedly wolf down whatever the previous diner had left: the clumps of rice, meat chewed down to gristle, a fish head with still some flesh on it, perhaps the succulent eyes. Occasionally they would dive underneath the tables and quickly gather up any stray grains or morsels and drop these into their plastic bags.

Her mother saw all this too. Quietly, she handed Mang Fred some hundred peso bills. "Go to that woman and her child," she told him. "Buy them whatever they want to eat and drink and let them keep the change if there is still any."

The mother and child were elated and turned to look gratefully with glowing eyes at Carina and her mother who gave them a wan little wave. Soon they were seated at a table before a plate piled high with rice, several dishes of meat and fish and a liter of soft drinks.

"They ordered so much, *baka ma-empacho sila* (they might get indigestion)," Mang Fred chuckled when he returned.

By then Carina had finished her Coke. She felt better already. Once again she took her mother's hand and placed it around her own shoulder. Then she wrapped her other arm around her mother's waist. It was as close to her mother as she could get where they could still walk side by side without both of them tripping over each other's feet. They walked ever so slowly through the heat and the dust, but it just felt good and right for them to be this way together.