

Gloria

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She wraps her brown brawny arms around him, holding him between her knees, hugging him close against her breasts. He leans back, sinking into the fold of her arms, his eyes fixed on the tv screen in the living room. But her eyes are not on the tv. They're gazing through the black iron grille of the balcony, gazing at the distant lights of the ships anchored out at sea, gazing towards where the brightly lit buildings shine like altars to their Chinese gods, and beyond that to the dark sky, the same dark sky that arcs over Manila City, the same dark sky with the same bright moon shining on the garbage of the Pasig River. Oblivious of the glances of her ma'am, seated in the armchair in the living room, her hand is stroking the child's back. The family is watching tv after dinner, and she has slipped out of the kitchen to join them. But she does not sit with them. Although her ma'am has not said anything, she knows that it will be regarded as presumptuous if she sits with them in the living room. So she sits on the cane chair in the balcony, and the boy, Timmy, the youngest of the two boys and a girl under her charge, has come out to sit with her. She wraps her arms around his warm tubby belly, inhaling the lavender fragrance of the talcum powder she has rubbed on him after his bath. When she has saved enough, she will buy a small tin of the same Johnson & Johnson talc powder to take home to Migoy and Amy, her two youngest. She kisses the boy's head.

"Timmy! Come in here!"

With a start, her arms drop to her side. The boy runs to his mother.

"What're you doing in the balcony, darling? Full of mosquitoes out there. Sit here with Mummy. Gloria!"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Have you finished washing the dishes?"

¹ Suchen Christine Lim's publications include four novels: *Fistful of Colours*, awarded the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992; *A Bit of Earth*, shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize, 2004; *Ricebowl*, and *Gift from The Gods*; a play co-authored with Ophelia Ooi, *The Amah: A Portrait in Black and White*, awarded Short Play Merit Prize 1989; *Stories of the Overseas Chinese*, a non-fiction book, 2005; and several children's books written for schools. Her latest publication is a collection of short stories, *The Lies That Build A Marriage*. In 1997, she was awarded a Fulbright fellowship at the International Writers' Programme in the University of Iowa, USA. She was the first Singapore writer-in-residence at the Arvon Foundation's Moniack Mhor Writers' Centre, Scotland. Currently, the Visiting Writer in Ateneo de Manila University, she has given readings in Malaysia, the Philippines, USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“What about the kitchen towels? Did you wash them and hang them up to dry?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Bring out the chocolate cake in the fridge. And don’t forget the plates and forks this time.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She goes into the kitchen and returns with the cake, the plates and forks on a tray. She sets it on the coffee table.

“How am I going to cut the cake without a knife? And you forgot napkins.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She goes into the kitchen again, returns with the cake knife and some napkins.

“No, you don’t cut it. I’ll cut it. You still have laundry to do tonight, don’t you?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Well, what’re you waiting for then? I don’t need you here.”

She retreats into the kitchen, and sits on the floor of the narrow alcove where the laundry is hung and where she sleeps at night. She sits beside her suitcase, the green and brown canvas suitcase that Tita Flora had lent her when the village knew that she was coming to Singapore to work. She sits beside it, her brown brawny arms wrapped around her shoulders, rocking her upper body back and forth, back and forth, as though she was rocking her baby. Her little Migoy.

“Good morning, ah, Mrs Ling.”

“Good morning, Alice. This is my new maid.”

“Oh, your new maid, ah?” The receptionist at the clinic looks at her. “What happened to the old one?”

“I had to change her,” her ma’am replies.

“To change maids, you got to pay extra or not?”

“This maid agency is very good. The employer is allowed to make two changes. No need to pay. You pay a transfer fee only at the third change.”

Her ma’am hands over a sheath of official papers across the counter.

“Glori-ah An-ton-nia Bern-na-dette San-tos,” the receptionist reads out her name in the singsong lilt of the Chinese in this clean and green city where even the trees look neat and tidy, very different from the unruly trees back home. But the sunlight is the same, the same. The sun that shines in this rich city is the same sun that shines on her *barangay*.

“Glor-ri-a!” the receptionist turns to her.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her voice squeaks like one of those tiny white mice in the pet shop. The clinic is full of watchful eyes. The eyes of these strangers are scrutinising her, eyes that say she's the stranger, not them. She keeps her head down, suddenly ashamed of her shabby blouse and faded black pants. The receptionist continues to address her in a loud voice as if that will help her to understand better.

"You, ah! You take this cup and go to the toilet. You pass urine into the cup, okay? Make sure enough urine is inside the cup, not outside; otherwise cannot do the pregnancy test. You got pee or not? If cannot pee now, you drink some water."

The woman turns to her ma'am.

"Must always tell them to drink water. Some of them, no pee, also go inside the toilet and stay there a long time. And their employer is out here waiting and waiting, and the maid is still inside the toilet. Many people complain to me. Other patients also want to use the toilet. So now I tell all the maids. Go drink some water first."

Her ma'am smiles and shakes her head. "I know. You've got to spell out every single step before they do it right."

"Ya, lor! Glor-ri-a, you go pee now."

Head down, she walks across towards the closed door.

"Oi! Not that door! The other door! That other one!" the receptionist shouts across the crowded waiting room.

A young man rises from his seat and points her to another door. He gives her an embarrassed smile. She nods, goes in and locks the door. The words, "thank you," are stuck like a fishbone in her throat. She leans over the sink, turns on the tap and cups her two hands to drink some water. It's only when she unzips her pants and squats over the plastic cup that she lets her tears fall.

A mother since age sixteen, she's thirty-six but looks fifty-six. This is the medical examination to decide her fate. Make sure that she's not pregnant before they will confirm her employment. What they don't know is that she doesn't want to get pregnant any more. She'd pushed Alex away. After the first four, she didn't want it any more. Didn't want more babies. But how could she keep saying no to her Alex? He wanted her even when they already had ten mouths to feed. And the wife should submit to the husband and not push him into sin, Father Paolo Biviendo had preached. These priests. They know only God's will. She cleans herself, zips up her pants, and washes her hands at the sink. She's through with these priests. It's up to Suzie and her now. Suzie will take care of the others. They will have to depend on their eldest sister. It'll be five long years before Alex is out of prison. In the meantime, she'll work and make money. Make lots of money. Pay back the agent; pay back the lawyer; pay back Tita Flora; pay back Ma Lulu and the others. She opens the washroom door, carefully holding with both hands the white plastic cup half filled with yellow urine.

“Speak up, Gloria. I can’t hear you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she repeats a little louder.

“Now the maid agency says you can cook. Is that right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. I want you to cook simple nutritious meals for the children. One meat, one vegetable, a soup and rice. I myself don’t know how to cook so you take charge of the menu. If you don’t know anything, ask. See this stack of cookbooks? You can look at them. I bought them for the last maid. You can read, can’t you?”

A slight movement of her head. Neither a “yes” nor a “no.” She’s unsure of the consequences if she should admit that she’d only been to school up to grade four.

“I’m very particular about cleanliness. When I come back from the office, I don’t want to see oily stains all over the stove or walk on an oily floor. This kitchen must be clean and spotless. You understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“If you run out of detergents, cleansers or anything, tell me. Don’t keep quiet like the other maids. Don’t tell me at the last minute or when I ask or when I find out we’ve run out of food and things. I’m busy working every day. I go to the supermarket once a week so you must let me know in advance. Here. This notebook and pen are for you. Write down all the things I’ve got to buy for the week. You understand?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“See this box? I’ve put fifty dollars inside. It’s for little emergencies. You run out of condiments or the children need to buy something in school, then you take the money from this box. Always ask the shopkeepers downstairs for a receipt. Put the receipts inside. I’ll check the box once a week and replenish it. You understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her head is reeling. Fifty Singapore dollars. How much is that in peso? That is... that is... that is two thousand peso. She’s amazed but she’s careful not to smile. Two thousand peso for her to buy things each week. She has never had so much money before.

“Let me see. What else do I have to tell you? Oh yes. Do you know how to use the washing machine? I’ve pinned up the instructions here. Just read and follow the instructions. If you don’t know how to operate it, ask John. He’s the oldest. John! John!”

“What?” The boy is surly at being called into the kitchen.

“Show Gloria how to operate the washing machine, and the other electrical things if she doesn’t know.”

“Very simple to use, what! Just read the instructions.”

“I will teach Gloria, Mummy!”

“Timmy! You teach Gloria?” Sarah runs into the kitchen, wagging her finger at the little one. “Hahaha! He’ll teach her all the wrong things, Mummy!”

“But I know! I know!”

“Quiet. You children, out. Go on. Out of the kitchen. I want to talk to Gloria.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The agent has explained things to you. But I will go through it again. You get three hundred dollars a month. The agency will deduct two hundred and seventy every month for ten months until you finish paying back what you owe them. So I will give the agency two hundred and seventy dollars, and give you the remainder, thirty dollars, each month. Do you understand? You get thirty dollars every month. The rest goes to your agent. So you must spend within your means. I’m sick and tired of maids borrowing money from me. No borrowing. My last two maids always borrowed. Father ill. Brother sick in hospital. Mother dying. Sister getting married. Brother going to college. Or uncle lost his harvest in floods and typhoons. All sorts of stories I’ve heard. I lost six hundred dollars just listening to the stories of the last two maids. Sir said, no borrowing. No advance payment. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Are you clear about the meals and kitchen? And the schedules of the children?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t just say yes ma’am, yes ma’am when you don’t understand. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Eeee! The pork tastes funny!”

The girl spits out the meat on to her plate. Timmy follows suit.

“You don’t like pork, Sarah?”

“This pork tastes funny. What is it?”

“Pork adobo.”

“Yuks! I don’t like it. I want fish fingers.”

“Me too! Me too!” Timmy claps his hands. The doorbell rings. She runs out to open the door for the eldest boy back from school.

“What’s for lunch, Gloria?”

“Yukky pork!” the girl giggles. “We’re having fish fingers instead.”

“Yeah, I want fish fingers too, Gloria.”

Without a word, she goes to the freezer. “How many you want?” she asks.

“Ten,” the eldest boy says.

“Me too,” the girl follows.

“Me too, me too,” Timmy clamours.

But there are only fifteen fish fingers in the box. She heats some oil in the frying pan, and empties the whole box into it. When the fish fingers are a golden brown, she gives the eldest boy seven pieces, and the two younger ones four fish fingers each.

“It’s not fair! You gave John more!”

“Cos I’m the eldest!”

“You’re not!” the girl shouts.

“I am!”

“You’re not!”

“I’m the oldest!”

“I was the oldest before you came to live with us!”

“You think I want to live here with you? You lizard face!”

“I’ll tell my Mummy you called me lizard face!”

“Tell-*lah!* Tell-*lah!* Cry baby! This is my Dad’s apartment!”

“It’s also my Mummy’s apartment!”

“Children! Children!” She tries to calm them.

“Mummy!” The girl is already calling her mother on the phone.

She is summoned to the phone.

“Yes, ma’am. No, ma’am. Yes, ma’am.” The children watch as her eyes brim over. “I understand, ma’am.” She puts down the phone and goes to the moneybox.

She takes out the fifty-dollar note. She likes the crisp, clean feel of the white and blue note. It’s not limp, dirty and crumpled like the red *Limampung Piso*, the fifty peso note that she’s used to handling. Fifty dollars. She can buy so many sacks of rice, so many kilos of fish, especially the bangus and tilapia that her children dream of eating, and so many yards of cloth to sew shirts for Bet and Vern, may be a blouse and skirt for Mol and Suzie, and buy shoes for Ninoy and Beng. Ahhh, a great many things she will buy with two thousand peso!

“Gloria! Where’re you going?” the girl asks.

“The shop downstairs. Your mummy says to buy more fish fingers.”

“I want to go too,” Timmy insists.

With the two children leading the way, she has no trouble taking the elevator from the 21st floor to the ground floor. She doesn’t tell them that the speed makes her dizzy. But she will tell her children when she sends a letter home. Timmy and Sarah lead her across the empty car park which, in the evening, will be filled with shiny clean cars parked in neat straight rows. Everything is clean, neat and orderly in her ma’am’s condo. No one says sub-division here. Not like in Manila. She will write and tell her children. They walk past the rows of palm trees, the swimming pool and the tennis courts. What Sarah calls “our neighbourhood shop” is in fact a small air-conditioned supermarket like the ones back home where the rich people in Quezon City shop, and where she has gone with Tita Flora to deliver the laundry. She’s working in a rich neighbourhood for a rich family. Her ma’am scolded her just now because she didn’t spend the fifty dollars.

What’s the matter with you, Gloria? You know there’s only one box of fish fingers. You know it’s not enough. Why didn’t you go downstairs to buy another box? What’s the money in the box for? I don’t want the children to quarrel just because there’s not enough food. For goodness sake! Use your brain. Go to the shop and buy another box of fish fingers! What’s so difficult about that? I’m in the middle of a

meeting. I don't want the children to call me about these little things. Do you understand?

She walks down rows of bottled soft drinks, cans of beer, bottles of soy sauces, fish sauces, tomato ketchup, spices, condiments, and boxes of cereals she'd never seen or eaten before; and milk powder packed in tins, pasteurised milk in packets and bottles, and jars of jams, tins of meat, chicken and fish crowded the shelves. The tins of Spam, and sardines in tomato sauce make her mouth water even though she's still full from her lunch of rice and pork adobo. Ahhh, she feels blessed. She's walking through this wonderland, armed with the knowledge that she has money power. She has fifty dollars. But the shopkeeper doesn't understand her when she speaks. He behaves as though she's not speaking English.

"What, ah? You new, ah?"

"Uncle, she's our new maid. Her name is Gloria," Sarah, the little busybody, explains.

The shopkeeper looks at her. "Oh, Glori-ah. What you want to buy, ha?"

She opens one of the glass doors of the refrigerators and takes out a big box of Bird's Eye Fish Fingers. Then for good measure, to show that she's in charge, she walks over to the other side of the shop, and picks out two pink kitchen towels, a mop and a red plastic pail. When the children ask for ice cream, she lets them choose what they want. Two years, may be three years, from now if her ma'am extends her contract, she will let Migoy and Amy choose what they want in the supermarket in Fairview. One day. Some day. She hands over the fifty dollars to the Chinaman shopkeeper.

That night, her ma'am tells her not to cook pork adobo any more.

"The children don't like it. You have it for lunch tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her brood would've rushed for the adobo. When there was enough pesos, she would buy the leftover fatty pork from Jong Boy's meat stall on the corner of the narrow lane between the tricycle and motor repair shops and Nana Ahchut's *sari-sari* store. Nana Ahchut had refused to let her buy on credit, not even the stale bread loaves and egg-sized *pan-de-sal* for the children's breakfast. *If I do that, Gloria, I will have to close down. Touch wood! I've many mouths to feed like you!* Nana Ahchut shouted through the iron grille, her fat face framed in the small window through which all the store's transactions were made. No one was allowed to enter the tiny store. *Been robbed too many times.* Nana Ahchut glared at her as if what Alex did was all her fault. The kids learnt to go without breakfast. They learnt to make a bit of rice and salted fish last until dinnertime when she returned from the laundry where she waited with other women to do the washing. If she were lucky, she had more kilos of clothes to wash, and earned more pesos. But that was not enough. Never enough to feed ten mouths. Her children were always hungry and scrawny like the chickens in Tita Flora's backyard scratching the dirt for scraps.

She scrapes into the bin the chunks of half eaten pork, rice and vegetables that the three children and their parents have left on their plates.

“We don’t eat leftovers. Throw them away unless you want to eat them for lunch tomorrow,” the ma’am said.

Why should she eat leftovers in this island of plenty? For once in her life, she will not eat leftovers. She’ll even have an egg for breakfast.

Her new radio alarm rings. She gets out of bed and starts to dress. At six-thirty, just as the sky brightens, the ma’am comes out of her bedroom. They leave the apartment together, and take the elevator down, she carrying the basket and the ma’am carrying her purse and car keys. It’s Saturday, the day when the children have tuition classes instead of school. It’s also the day she goes to the fresh food market with the ma’am. She looks forward to this weekly trip although the ma’am dislikes the wet market, and would rather shop in Cold Storage, but Sir does not like the meat from the supermarket.

She sits in the front passenger seat with the basket on her lap. The ma’am starts the car; they rarely talk in the car. When they reach the market, the ma’am parks the car and strides ahead in her tee shirt, denim shorts and high-heeled slippers. She follows with her piece of paper and the blue plastic basket. Their routine has not changed this past one year. But today, she intends to vary things a little.

“Two chickens.” She points to two large freshly slaughtered chickens. By now, the chicken man is used to her. Then she points to a bag of chicken bones and adds it to her usual order. “To make soup, ma’am,” she says. “Timmy likes chicken soup.”

“Ok. Is this enough?”

“Enough, ma’am.” She keeps the pleasure out of her voice.

They move on to the Malay butcher’s stall to buy beef, and then walk to the other side of the market to buy pork from the Chinese butcher. By now, she’s used to this funny arrangement of selling meat in the markets in Singapore. Only the Chinese sell pork, and only the Malays sell beef. Back home at Jong Boy’s stall, things are easier. No one makes a fuss if a leg of mutton or beef is hanging next to the head of a pig. When she mentioned this to the other maids at the church she goes to on Sundays, they laughed. Last year, when she was still a new arrival, they had told her that all Chinese in Singapore are Buddhist, and all Indians are Hindu, and they don’t eat beef.

Of course, we eat beef, Gloria. Cook beefsteak for us if you know how to do it. As long as the children eat what you cook, and Sir does not complain, that’s fine with me. I just don’t want to come home and hear a host of complaints from the children. You understand?

Her ma’am does not care how much food she buys and cooks these days.

“Pork one and a half kilo,” she points to the rump, which has a bit more fat. “And lean pork one kilo. The bones four dollars.”

At the fish stall, she adds two kilos of fish and half a kilo of shrimps, and tells herself to stop; don't over do it. The ma'am might ask questions even though the ma'am's mind is always busy at the bank, and she works late like Sir. Both earn a big fat salary. They won't mind paying extra. They won't even miss it. She knows because the ma'am and Sir talk at the dinner table. Last Christmas, the ma'am's bank gave her six extra months' salary as a bonus. The family bought a new car, and went to America for a holiday. During the two weeks they were away, she worked for the ma'am's mother, and the old lady gave her fifty dollars. When the ma'am returned, she also gave her fifty dollars on Christmas Day. It was the first time that she'd received so much money. The money is in the bank now. She can't touch it. The ma'am had made her deposit her money in the neighbourhood Post Office bank.

Don't be stupid, Gloria. You maids always sent your money home. You shouldn't. How do you know that your family is not wasting your hard earned money? You must save for yourself. Put the money in the bank here. Earn interest. I'll use my name to open a joint account with you. Don't worry. I won't run off with your money. And you keep the book. At the end of your contract, you can withdraw all the money and go home with a lump sum. Do you understand?

"Gloria! What're you thinking? Are we through?"

"Sorry, ma'am. I forgot to buy sweet *tauhu*."

"You're still saying *tauhu*. People here will think you want bean curd for frying. It's *tau-huay* for sweet bean curd."

"Sorry, ma'am. Timmy wants."

"Here's ten dollars. Go quickly. The market is getting crowded. I'm tired."

The ma'am will let her buy anything if it's for the children. Her ma'am walks ahead carrying her purse and car keys. She follows with the blue basket loaded with food and two large pink plastic bags filled with enough meat and veg to feed eight adults for a week. And the ma'am hasn't questioned her. Is this a sign? Is God being fair at last? Maybe God knows her troubles and gives her this chance. She can't be choosy. If she's given the chance, wouldn't she be a fool not to take it? Suzie is gone.

I know this will break your heart, Gloria. Suzie has left home. She didn't tell anyone. Not me. Not her brothers. Not her sisters. Not a soul. Oh, Gloria, she left them in the dark. Such a shock to me when Migoy came running to say their sister is gone. Tita Flora wrote.

She remembers holding that letter in her hand as the tears gathered and the news sank in. Bent over the kitchen sink, she had clutched her breasts. Her heart was broken again. How long could a heart remain a heart? Her heart had been hacked too many times. First, by Alex, then Ninoy and her drunken *Tatay*, the father she wished she'd never had. All day she was poorly. The ma'am, thinking she had caught the flu, had taken her to the clinic where the nurse had made her take a blood and urine test. *Just to be sure*, the ma'am said to the nurse in Chinese. *Just to be sure*, the nurse's silent nod agreed. Did they think she was stupid and diseased? That she would infect them with her broken heart? That she was too stupid to understand their *Chink-chong*

code? Did the ma'am think that she'd caught something and would pass it to the children? Just to be sure. Always, it's just to be sure. The ma'am who has everything wants to be sure of everything. She who has nothing is never sure of anything. She cannot even be sure of the child who dropped out of her womb. Suzie's gone. Her flesh and blood has left her.

No letter. No phone call. Not even a note. *Did Gabriel Jose leave the village too? Did she elope with him? Did you check with Gab's family? Did you ask them?* She had cried and screamed into the public phone at the post office till her phone card ran out of money. How did this happen? Who could tell her? Would Suzie have run away if she were there? If her Papa were there? Alex. Alex. He was a fool to think he could leave the warehouse without the guards knowing. A fool to get himself arrested. A fool that no lawyer would defend because there was no money! Fool! Fool! Fool! Suzie. Her child! Her baby. The first in the family to graduate from high school. Her pride.

She had to ask herself: What do you do when your only hope runs off because she's afraid of the burden you placed on her thin shoulders? She runs away because she doesn't want to end up like you and her aunts sleeping, eating and shitting in the hovels under the bridges of Pasig and Quezon City. Cardboard palaces that the typhoons blow away and the floods wash away. Can you blame Suzie for taking off? Can you blame your daughter if she doesn't want to be like you? What do you do? Where can you find her? O God! Where can I find her? Is this why You have given me this opportunity? This skill? These men?

Carefully, she wraps the extra pieces of fried fish and pork sausages in sheets of tin foil and pushes them to the back of the freezer behind the Tupperware boxes of frozen pork, prawns and fish. No one will bother to look into the freezer. On Sunday, her day off, she will take the bus to Lucky Plaza in Orchard Road and pass the package to Ramos and Roddy, and they will pay her.

Sarah runs into the kitchen waving an envelope.

"Glori-ah! Letter for you! From Japan. Can I have the stamps?"

"Later, later. Go and play."

The girl runs out. Hands trembling, she tears open the envelope. She sits on the floor in the alcove of the kitchen beside Tita Flora's suitcase, and stares at the two photographs. She brings the letter to her nose and inhales its sweet fragrance. The letter is written on pink perfumed paper with a border of tiny flowers in pale blue. *Dearest Mama*. Her eyes start to brim. Nine months and eleven days after she's run away, Suzie writes, *Dearest Mama, how are you? I am well. I am working in a hotel in Tokyo... Dearest Mama. Dearest Mama.*

"Gloria! Sarah says you've a letter from Japan. Do you have anyone working there?" the ma'am asks her after dinner.

“Yes, ma’am. My eldest daughter.”

“Oh. Is she working as a maid too?”

“No, ma’am. She’s a secretary in a big hotel in Tokyo.”

She takes out the photographs as proud proof of her daughter’s new status.

“My daughter graduated from high school.”

“Oh. Very pretty girl. Did you say she’s a secretary in a hotel?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And she’s dressed like this?”

Something in the ma’am’s question has poisoned her eyes. Her sight is maimed. She stares at the photos. She can no longer see her daughter. Instead she sees a young teenage girl in a bright red negligee reclining on the large bed. A bright red sunny smile plastered on her face. The other photo shows her in a black mini skirt and high-heeled black leather boots outside a grand-looking building with bright lights and Japanese men in the background.

“It’s her bedroom, ma’am,” she insists, barely able to control the tremor in her voice as she thrusts the photos back into the envelope. No. She will not tear out the stamps for Sarah.

One year, eleven months and twenty-nine days later.

“Mummy, where’s Gloria?” Sarah asks licking her fingers clean.

Linda has ordered in home delivery of two large pizzas, three orders of garlic bread and salad for the children.

“Gloria has gone shopping, dumbo,” John reaches for the largest slice of pizza. “She’s flying home tomorrow.”

“I will miss Gloria, Mummy.”

“Don’t be daft, Timmy. Miss her? For what? We’ll get a new maid soon.” Pause. Then, “Right, Mum?” John turns to her.

“Yes.” Linda gives him a bright smile. It’s so seldom that he calls her ‘Mum’ that she’s willing to overlook his comment about not missing the maid. But it’s not right. She’ll have to correct him later.

“It’s okay, Timmy. You can miss Gloria a little.”

“I’ll miss her a lot, Mummy.”

“Then you’re stupid!”

“Mummy!”

“It’s okay, Timmy. *Kor-kor* John is just teasing you.”

“But it’s stupid to miss the maid. They always leave. I don’t miss any of them!”

“John, that’s enough,” George says.

The boy stuffs his mouth with garlic bread and ignores his father and the rest of the family.

“It’s okay, John, if you don’t want to miss anyone. Here. Have another slice of pizza.”

She pushes the pizza box towards him. The boy makes no move. She rises and hands him a slice of pizza on a plate.

“Thanks,” a pause, then, “Mum.”

Sarah giggles. George smiles. Ack! She’s worrying too much as usual. John’s just a bitter boy ever since his mother left him. And there are all sorts of stories about wicked stepmothers. George said that she shouldn’t force the pace; let things happen naturally. But she likes to nudge things forward a little. She glances at the clock.

“Da, it’s nine o’clock. Gloria’s not back yet.”

“Don’t worry. It’s her last night in Singapore. May be she wants to paint the town red. Didn’t you go with her to close the joint account, and she withdrew all her money?”

“Ya. That woman has saved quite a bit. Nine hundred and ninety something. Times that by thirty pesos. How much is that?”

“Hey, you’re the one who works in the bank,” George laughs and turns on the tv to watch the news.

“Thirty-one thousand six hundred and forty-five peso,” John announces.

“Not much for two years’ work,” George turns around.

“Not much here but a lot in the Philippines. Luckily I asked her to open the account. She sent quite a bit of money home. So many children. Ten. She’s packed two large suitcases. She muttered something about opening a stall. What they call *sari-sari*.”

“Did you check her bags?”

“What? You think she might’ve squirreled away some of our things to take home to sell? I gave her all the children’s old clothes and some of yours and mine too. But I’ll check her bags tomorrow before we leave for the airport. If I check tonight, she can still re-pack while we’re asleep. If a maid wants to steal, she’ll find ways to do it. What can you do? She lives with us, and we’re not home all the time. Hey. You three! Go to bed! This is adult talk. Go to bed! Brush your teeth! If she’s not back by eleven, I’m going to lock the door and go to bed.”

“What time did she leave the house?”

“After lunch. I gave her the day off. She said she wanted to buy gifts for her family.”

“If she’s not back by midnight, we’ll call the police and report her missing.”

“You think she doesn’t want to go back to the Philippines?”

“How do I know what she wants? I just don’t want to lose our deposit at the Manpower Ministry if she goes missing.”

“I hope she doesn’t get into an accident or something. The next maid we get must be younger and unmarried.”

“Aha! Not scared she might seduce the Sir?”

“George, be serious. You don’t joke about such things, okay?”

“Hey, read the papers. The media is always biased against us. They always highlight the man doing the seducing. What about the woman, eh? A young maid.”

“Okay, enough. You go and quarrel with the media about it. I’ll get a fat and ugly one for us. But young and single. Not another mother.”

“You’re the one who insisted on an older woman and a mother.”

“I know; I know. My mistake. Have you seen Gloria with Timmy before I put a stop to her hugging and kissing? She likes to cuddle my darling.”

“Our son likes her.”

“It’s not healthy. All this hugging and pawing! That’s why I stopped her from bathing Timmy.”

“Ahhh! A case of maternal jealousy.”

“Shut up, George. I don’t like maids to hug and kiss my kids. I can do that myself. I told her before. Chinese people. We don’t like strangers to kiss and hug our children. She said Filipinos do it all the time. I told her I don’t care what she or other Filipinos do back home. But in my home, I set the rules. I don’t want the maid to hug my kids.”

“Aye, women and mothers!”

“Sexist!” She throws a cushion at him. George ducks. He clicks the remote and switches on the tv. She switches it off.

“I want to talk. Did you hear John call me, Mum, just now?”

A tired “Yes, I told you he’d come round if you give him time.”

“Ya, claim credit for it. You think it’s so easy to be your son’s stepmum? I noticed a change when I stopped Gloria from hugging the two younger ones. I mean just see it from John’s angle. He’s the oldest. Already he sees himself as the outsider. The other two are my own, and what does the maid do? She’s always hugging Timmy, and Sarah when Sarah allows it. I know she misses her own kids. I’ve heard her telling Timmy about her ten children.”

“Okay, what? What’s your point?”

“The point is that John felt better after I stopped Gloria from hugging Timmy and Sarah. He’s eleven. Too old for Gloria to hug him. But he’s still a child and feels deprived. Seeing the maid hug the other two and not him makes him feel even worse about being my stepson. Got it? So, no hugging except by me. I’m the mum who hugs all three of them. I hug John whether he wants it or not. Just to show that I treat him as my own. And you think I’m acting like a jealous...”

“Come here.”

Her husband wraps his arms around her and plants a wet kiss on her lips. The phone rings. George picks up the receiver.

“Yes. Yes. That’s right. Please wait a sec. I’ll check with my wife. Is her name Gloria Antonia Bernadette Santos?”

“Yes. What’s wrong?”

“Shhh! Yes, she’s our maid. Okay. Okay. We’ll be there in half an hour.”

It's almost two in the morning by the time they are home again. They were silent throughout the ride home from the Tanglin Police Station. Linda clasps and unclasps her hands. George had told her expressly not to say anything or ask any question until they got home. He didn't want a scene. He handled everything at the station. But the moment he shuts their front door, he sits down beside her, and they confront the bovine face of their maid.

"Sit down, Gloria. Take the chair opposite us. Now take out your handbag. Show us how much you have in there," she begins.

The woman empties the contents of her purse on to the dining table.

"Count your money."

They wait till she has finished.

"How much do you have? Come on. Tell us. How much do you have inside your purse? You've just counted the money. How much?"

The brown sullen face wears a sheen of sweat and oil; the dark eyes are averted; they would not meet her eyes.

"I'm not budging until you tell us, Gloria."

The woman looks at her, stupefied.

"I mean it, Gloria."

"Three hundred and twenty-eight dollars and seventy-five cents, ma'am."

"You have three hundred and twenty-eight dollars in your purse, Gloria. More than three hundred Singapore dollars! Why the hell did you have to steal? Why did you do such a stupid thing on the eve of your departure? Tomorrow you will be charged. Do you know that? Tomorrow, you will go to jail and miss your flight! Sir will forfeit his deposit with the Ministry of Manpower and I don't know what else will happen to you! You're a fool!"

She feels the pressure of George's restraining hand as she stared into the stupid woman's unweeping eyes till shame makes the woman look down.

"Put your money back into your purse, Gloria," George says. "Where were you when you were caught?"

A long silence. Then she says, "Scotts Shopping Centre, Sir."

"The police told us that the security guards searched your bags and person. They found two bras unpaid for, two packets of AA batteries, a transistor radio and three shirts for men. All not paid."

"I was going to pay, Sir."

"Don't lie to us, Gloria!" she yells. How good it is to yell at the cow! She's been bottling up her anger all the way from Tanglin and up the East Coast Expressway till they reached home. "The guards stopped you at the exit! If you were going to pay, you should've been at the cash counter! What were you doing at the exit with all the unpaid goods? Ha? Tell me!"

Again she feels the press of George's hand, restraining her.

“The police have impounded your passport. Tomorrow we have to take you to the subordinate court where you will be charged,” George tells the brazen liar. “You know that in Singapore, shoplifters are jailed. Depending on how seriously the judge views your case, Gloria, you could be jailed for one or two weeks. Do you understand? We will not bail you out. You will miss your flight home tomorrow. We have already paid for this flight. If you want to go home after serving your jail sentence, you will have to pay for your own air ticket. Do you understand?”

The woman nods; her eyes are dumb as a cow’s waiting for the butcher’s knife.

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