

## Landing

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“Ross! Where on earth are we? There’s been no cell-site for hours!” Grace complained as she aimed her cell phone in all directions. “I wish you hadn’t taken me with you. You know *naman* that I have a recital for my Aria class on Wednesday!” she continued.

“Don’t you want to meet my mother?” I asked, driving a little faster to reach Candon, where I hoped there might be some kind of phone signal.

“Yeah, sure, but she could have chosen a better time to get sick, like during sem break.”

“Grace, be reasonable. Stop acting like a spoiled brat.”

“Shit, still no signal! I have to text my teacher! I don’t know if I’m singing *Habanera* or *Seguidilla*!”

“Why not try the *quesadilla* instead?” I joked, wishing she would stop whining.

Only in her third year in the UP College of Music, and already she was acting like a diva. All my friends had warned me about her. Besides being fifteen years younger, she had a nasty reputation for leaving her female lovers for men, then her male lovers for lesbians. None of her affairs lasted more than a year. They also claimed that she was a “high-maintenance” kind of girl, whatever that meant. As if that would have thrown me off. I have always thought my girls deserved the best. Love is just like any investment. You only reap what you sow, and how I wanted to reap Grace, the first time I had seen her. And when I heard her sing Schubert’s *Ave Maria* in the commitment ceremony of a lesbian couple I had just met, I knew I could commit myself to “maintaining” this delicate thing.

“You never take me seriously!” she said, pulling at her long hair and securing it with a tortoise shell banana clip I had bought for her in Hong Kong.

“Honey, you’re the only thing I take seriously. That’s why I work so hard!” I replied. I was proud of the job I had done of keeping Grace for a year and a half now. In that time, I doubled my quota of condominium units sold. It was a very good year. I even bought this Rav 4 and placed the word “DIVA” on a Philippine Centennial commemorative plate. I knew she would not think it was excessive.

It had been about seven years since I came home. There was always so much work to do. Inang always begged me to come home but I just couldn’t afford to take

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any vacations. The last time I was there, I saw that Manong Tavio's house had been renovated and "concretised"; that's what we called the houses now made of concrete. A sure sign that the family was moving up. I did not get a chance to talk with him. Or maybe I did not want to.

I was sorry to lose Detdet. But back then I didn't know how I could have kept her from marrying Manong Sammy. I remember crying and telling her over and over that I loved her, but I do not think either of us really knew what I meant.

I grew up in Narvacan, a small town in Ilocos Sur famous for nothing but its convento, which, like most convents, looks like an old prison.

"Did you know that Diego Silang kept the Bishop of Vigan captive here during his revolt?" Detdet proudly explained when she took me for a tour of it after Mass. Because she was four years older than I was, she took it upon herself to educate me in matters that she thought were important. I wondered why she bothered to keep me company, but I liked it; it made me feel special, walking around town hand-in-hand with a high school girl.

We were neighbours. Her father made hand-painted Spanish fans that my mother sold house-to-house in Vigan. When Inang put them in slim boxes, she called them "*abanico*," which justified the twenty-peso price tag. She would tell the wealthy *mestizos* that an aging local artist had painted them painstakingly and that each design was unique. And that one day these *abanicos* would become family heirlooms because the craft would die with Lakay Octavio.

It was true – except that Manong Tavio was not that old. He was probably only as old as my mother, who was 42. Every Saturday, when I had no classes, I went to Detdet's house to watch her father work. The whole *sala* smelled of paint and turpentine. I breathed deeply of it the moment I entered because I knew that the longer I stayed there, the more the exquisite scent would diminish. It always made me lightheaded, especially because the place was so dark, save for the big bulb lighting Manong Tavio's desk. The fans that he had finished painting were laid open to dry on the floor, leaning on the walls. I had to be careful not to disturb their positions, though Manong Tavio did not get angry when I sometimes tripped. He hardly talked. He was always bent over a fan, his little brush poised over a flower design. His thick eyeglasses rested lightly over his aquiline nose as he peered meticulously at the hues of his flowers, making sure he rendered the colours realistically. I was transfixed by how he could turn an ordinary *paypay* into beautiful *abanicos* that made ladies feel more elegant, even when they were melting in the heat of the church.

I wondered why Detdet did not study her father's craft. If I had been Manong Tavio's daughter, I would have begged him to teach me. I would have practiced everyday how to wield that tiny brush like a magic wand. And instead of flowers, I would paint birds. My birds would sing the wind every time a lady opened her *abanico* to cool herself. But when I told Detdet about this dream, she thought it was silly.

"I don't want to end up like my father, always sitting here in the house. I want to go to Manila, maybe become a movie star," she said.

I didn't think her dream was silly. To me, she did look like a movie star. Unlike

mine, her skin was fair and she had her father's nose, common among the Ybannags of Cagayan. She was tall and her eyes and hair were brown. She said she took after her *mestiza* mother, whom she had never met, but whose sepia picture she kept in her wallet.

"Tatay told me that Mama went to Manila to look for a job when I was still a baby," she said.

"But how will you find her?" I asked.

"Oh, she will find me, because I will become famous," she smiled. That was the only flaw on her face. Her teeth were not aligned. "*Sungki-sungki*," I teased her.

"But Tatay said this means that one day I will have more money than I need," she explained.

"Why?"

"Ay *tabbed*, see, I have more teeth than my mouth can hold. It's a sign!"

I didn't argue anymore because she seemed utterly convinced. Besides, I thought her *sungki-sungki* was charming.

In this town, few families had concrete houses. Those that did were talked about and envied. People whispered, "*Dayta ti balay ti landing*." I did not know what "landing" meant; it is not an Ilocano word. But I was ashamed to ask, worried that it might be something only adults were allowed to talk about. Inang already accused me of being *atrevida* and I did not want to live up to that name.

One day, our sleepy town was suddenly in a flurry. Families that had grown daughters, *dagiti balasang*, were ecstatic. "*Adda ti landing! Adda ti landing!*" they told each other. I could not restrain my curiosity anymore so I asked my mother.

"*Ay ading ko*, the *landing* is a *manong* who has come home from Hawaii," she replied.

I wondered what was so exciting about an arrival from Hawaii, aside from the PX goodies they had in their boxes, which were distributed only among their relatives anyway. I didn't think Spam was such a delicacy either, compared to our *bagnet*. Inang probably noticed the question in my eyes, so she explained, "They come home to find a young bride."

"They come all the way from Hawaii for that?"

"Maybe they want to marry Ilocanas because the foreigners are no good. Now finish your food, I'll be leaving soon."

That afternoon, I kept thinking of the *landing* and their concrete houses and their Ilocana brides. I wondered if Inang was sorry that I was too young to be considered. But even if I had been old enough, I still wouldn't have wanted to marry a stranger and leave my family. I just couldn't understand what the commotion was about.

"Rosario, pssst!" I heard somebody call. I knew it was Detdet because we had a special whistle-call for each other. I leaned out from the *pasamano*.

"*Adda ti baili madamdama, diay balay ti landing!*" Detdet shouted, smiling widely.

"A dance, so what?"

"I'm going there with Tatay!"

"What for?"

“Ay, *tabbed!* I’m turning 15 this year; maybe the *landing* will like me.”

Before I could ask her not to go, she waved and said, “I have to go and get dressed! See you!”

I watched her back as she hopped-and-skipped away from me. I wondered how I would feel if I had caught her hopping-and-skipping like that towards me. It was a silly thought and I dismissed it quickly. I decided to go to the *baili* to observe the spectacle.

When I got there at four, the relatives of the *landing* were busy decorating their garden with colored strips of crêpe paper. Some were still making a fence of banana leaves around the dance area. I noticed that they had even hired a brass band to provide the music. While the band was tuning their shiny instruments, someone was pumping bright kerosene lamps we called “Coleman,” placing them in the corners of the dance area and on the long table set especially for the *landing* and his family.

*Batibot* chairs were arranged across from the table in a long line, which I later learned were to be occupied by the girls. To the right of the special table was the food counter. The *lechon* was already displayed and the sight of it made my stomach rumble. But I swore not to partake of the feast offered by the Manong *Landing*. I was not going to be fooled by his money. I was taught by my mother not to be *agbibisin*; she always scolded me when she caught me eating at Detdet’s house. She reasoned that the neighbours might think that she did not have enough to feed me. But I could not resist it when Manong Tavio served his *ginataang talangka*, crablets cooked in coconut milk.

The crowd outside the fenced area soon grew thicker. I hid among the young men who came to look at the man who wanted to steal their girls from them. Back then, I was not sure why I came.

Then the girls arrived with their parents. I barely recognized Detdet in her starched pink dress and new white shoes with heels. She looked so silly with her hair curled and tied with a matching pink bow. Did she think all that pink stuff on her cheeks and lips made her prettier? Manong Tavio did not look at anyone when they arrived. He took Detdet in front and quickly retreated.

The girls came in their best dresses, cinched at the waist to emphasise their slender bodies. And the whole place bloomed like a bouquet with their mothers’ jasmine and tea rose perfumes on them. Those who came earlier chose the middle seats, thinking that they might be seen more easily by the *landing* from there. Some of the girls looked happy to be there. They were glowing, radiant with the wish to be chosen and taken to Waikiki. Even though the place had a terrible name, it offered lovely images of a golden horizon.

Manang Lilia particularly kept looking at herself in her compact mirror, arranging the ribbons on her hair. She also kept getting up and crossing the dance floor to go to her parents for some thing or the other. She even dropped her *abanico* on the way and made a big show of picking it up. I guess she was hoping that the *landing* was watching from his window. She was turning 21 that year, and none of the town’s men had shown any interest in her. It was a mystery to everyone, because she had such large breasts and hips, prized in our women because they were considered

auspicious signs of a woman's fertility.

Most of the girls were not even twenty. In our town, when a woman reached this age and she was not married, she was seen as a failure and her own parents would tell her that she should have entered the *convento*, so that she could at least serve the Lord and not be a burden to them. Once a girl had her menstruation, she was considered suitable for marriage. That's why we were taught early how to cook, how to sew, how to wash and iron clothes. I did not think I would ever marry, though. I just wanted to take care of Inang in her old age, for who else would?

By six o'clock, the host family announced that before dinner would be served, "let us welcome our beloved Sammy, who has made this feast possible!" Everyone clapped, and the band began to play "*Pamulinawen*," a love song. Manong Sammy came down from their concrete steps wearing an "Americana," a navy blue coat and tie, with a matching felt hat. I wondered how he could endure the heat in that outfit, but maybe it made him feel good, knowing that he was the only man in that crowd who owned such an elegant suit.

I had heard that he was old, but it was only at that moment that I realized how old he was. He looked like he could be my grandfather, God rest his soul. Though he had kind eyes, I could not imagine any of these girls being his wife. It was ludicrous, like the way he probably wore the hat to hide his bald head. I was afraid he might fall down from the stairs, because he looked like he needed a cane to support him. As he smiled widely, I couldn't help but notice his ill-fitting, but perfect set of false teeth. He would definitely struggle with that *lechon*.

Watching him take his seat at the special table, I felt a lump in my throat. I was sorry for the poor girl who would be chosen, even for Manang Lilia. I was angry with the parents for wanting this fate for their daughters. How could they allow their own daughters to be taken by a man who already smelled like his own grave? But I was also sorry for Manong *Landing*, because none of these women would marry him for love and he knew it. He knew that the *baili*, the whole *landing* phenomenon, was the only way for him to find a wife. Maybe they all wanted to believe that love could be learned in time. Not that he had much time left. Or maybe that was the point that I was missing, because I was not old enough.

I didn't want to watch him dance with Detdet. I didn't want to see him touch her. I ran. Ran away from that wretched place as fast as I could. My tears blurred my vision, and as I looked up, I saw that the sun had just sunk on the horizon and the sky was red. Red as the tomato thrust into the mouth of the splayed *lechon*, which suddenly made me nauseated. *Makasarsarwa*, I thought, as I spat the bile out of my mouth.

"Ross, hello! I said, I need to pee!" Grace said, nudging my shoulder.

I pulled over and said, "There, pee." All around were tobacco fields ready for the second harvest of the season. I got out of the car and breathed. I remembered my first job, stringing tobacco leaves on thin strips of bamboo for drying. My fingers still have scars from the sharp points and edges of the bamboo.

"Excuse me, but unlike some people, I cannot just squat on the fucking highway so I need you to find me civilisation before I make a mess in your car," Grace insisted

in a shrill voice.

“Fine.”

I drove. Not talking, I drove. I drove past Narvacan, past the bridge over Abra de Ilog, straight to Vigan. I realised that if I couldn't have Detdet and I have turned myself into a lesbian *landing*, I could at least pick someone who would be grateful. I stopped in front of Cordillera Inn, took my wallet, and gave her two thousand pesos as she quickly got out of the car.

“Go. I'll see you in Manila.” I said. For once, she could not say anything. Or maybe I just didn't hear her. She stood on the street with her cell phone on one hand and the money on the other, watching me drive away, her head bowed – regretting what she was losing.

No. She was probably just texting someone for help.