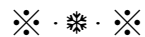


Stones, fist-sized holes, and stunted buildings with walls crumbling from the pressure of their neighbors rest on the narrow streetway. The jeepney stumbles along and while its own tires are accustomed to both the Philippines and the terrain underfoot, our luggage isn't. Holding on with every jolt and bump, my sister mirrors my own attempts at keeping the luggage steady. The driver shouts something in Tagalog, and we both nod as if understanding the strange formation of syllables and sounds.

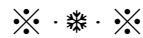
People drift along the street. Their heads shift in our direction with the approaching grumble of tire on earth. Some freeze under the wave of heat, their eyes rolling along to each turn of the dirt crusted tires. Feeling their stares almost as starkly as the sun's, I suddenly want to remove my hand from the luggage. Along the edge of the road wanders a stray dog, the contours of its rib cage pushing against matted skin like fingers to a piece of thin cloth. Just beyond is a young girl grasping the hem of her mother's shirt and smiling despite her bare feet resting on the scorched earth. I try to smile back even though I can't seem to bring my eyes to meet hers.



Fans hum a flat melody, harmonizing with the almond colored curtains brushing against the window panes. A couch stands in the center of the room with its sand dipped arms stretched in greeting. I hover in the shadow of my grandfather as we submerge into the crowded space and try to match faces to the family photographs locked away in my grandparent's closet back home. Some, I recognize, but most are strangers.

My grandfather's hand falls onto my shoulder as he propels me to his younger brothers and sisters. Here, his words flow like the wind blowing from the fans stationed in the corners of the room: smooth and easy. Even though I cannot understand the Tagalog, I listen. I watch, too,

as I perch on the edge of a wooden chair later that evening. I watch how he floats around the room, eager to fill the gaps of the many years apart from his siblings with detailed words. I notice how he strides to the kitchen to grab a glass of water in a way that seems as if he never left his home for a place where his steps fall much heavier and his English words fall broken and jumbled from his lips.

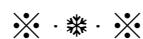


The town is a chaotic calm. Tin-roofed structures teetering over tables of cheap market goods are wedged between gas stations sprinkled with drifting cardboard and buildings with balconies splashed in colored clothing. The van squeezes through the street, holding its breath with each sharp turn before screeching to a halt in front of a white church. The patio reflects the light of the sun and stone angels stand like guards at the door.

While the streets to our back and the buildings around us are bustling with people and sounds, the scene before us is quiet. My grandfather walks to the side of the patio and we follow, stopping in front of a massive pedestal holding up a golden statue of my great grandfather. Following his engraved name is a long passage written in Tagalog, so I cannot understand it. But, when my grandfather quiets to read about his own grandfather, I study the words, too, wishing I knew what they said.

At dinner that night, I ask my grandmother to teach me how to count to ten in Tagalog.

*Esa, dalwa, tatlo....*



The market vendors lean against their neighbors on trembling legs, anxiously awaiting the small breath of wind that will send them tumbling to the cracked pavement like dominoes

forged from grated metal and plastic tarp. I hold tightly to my grandmother's hand as she parts the sea of drifting bodies packed so tightly between vendors it feels as if we are wading through an ocean of denim and loose knit cotton. Perhaps it is in noticing the sweat slicked state of my hair or in feeling the damp layer of moisture painted along my palm which presses against her own that she pulls me toward a stand harboring metal buckets overflowing with fabric fans.

My grandmother replaces my hand with a fan, snapping it open and fluttering it once in the air before ringing it shut again. After examining the small, black lined label stamped to its wooden body, she approaches the vendor— a kind looking woman donning loose fitted jeans and sandals crusted with dirt. When she smiles, I notice that her front tooth is chipped, another completely absent. I smile back.

My grandmother begins to speak quickly in Tagalog so that I cannot understand, gesturing to the fan. The woman shakes her head. My grandmother speaks again, and I realize she is not gesturing to the fan but to the price tag. The woman shakes her head again, but it is a weaker movement, less certain.

I take my grandmother's hand and the second the tentative words leave my lips, my grandmother is mirroring the vendor's shaking head. Unable to look at the vendor, I focus on my grandmother, suddenly noticing the brightness in her eyes, the determination forged in her expression. My second argument dies on my lips, fading away like snow against warm pavement. Still, I cannot bring myself to meet the vendor's gaze as my grandmother speaks again and, this time, the woman does not shake her head.



The rocks press sharply against my bare feet. I grab my grandfather's hand, not wanting him to slip as the ocean waves run around our legs. Men coaxing their canoes into the water and green-splashed mountains rising from islands in the near distance frame the world. A light breeze pushes against the now familiar wall of thick heat; I now know this to be a sign that night is approaching.

Time passes quickly. Reflecting off the sea's surface, the wings of a flamingo seem to drape across the clouds, shielding the sky from the darkness of night with a hazy pink. The rising mountains transform into silhouettes and the canoe riders nothing more than shadows gliding across the surface of the sky.

Bright and clear, the sunlight shines onto my grandfather's large, round glasses. I wonder what he sees when he looks out onto the horizon. In the sky, within the folds of flamingo feathers, is he watching the dogfights he'd seen as a five-year old during WWII? On the water, instead of strangers driving their canoes beyond silhouetted mountains, does he see himself and his brothers swimming in that polluted river near his childhood home? Or perhaps he is simply remembering all of the years he spent living at home with his huge family before moving to a foreign country where the sunsets don't shine quite the same.

I don't know what he really sees, and I don't ask, either. Instead, I give his hand a squeeze and smile when he does the same.