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Only the Beginning

JOSE Y. DALISAY JR.

Like most Filipino boys, I parted with my excess ouncelet of flesh just before my voice deepened. I was twelve, that year before high school, and just beginning to be aware that certain sights hitherto unremarked, certain curves and folds of skin on the female body could provoke distressfully embarrassing responses in mine. That could be very difficult if you habitually wore nothing more below your navel than shorts cut by your mother out of B-Meg chicken feed bags.

As far as I knew, no boy in my corner of town wore briefs—that was for rich and fussy kids, who wouldn’t have borne names like my buddy’s, “Masingki,” the *siga-siga* of the block who liked to perch on top of the adobe wall that separated our *looban* from the rest of Creation. Or Atong, who performed wondrous feats of self-torture on the *baras*, twisting his upper frame on the makeshift chinning bar and holding still, sweat popping out of his brow, until his body shook mightily all over and he let go all at once and dropped back to earth quiet as a cat and walked away, grinning to himself, leaving us dry-throated with envy. A few years later he would die of leukemia, but at that moment all his corpuscles were perfectly in rhythm, swimming around his body to wherever they were needed.

Or Mang Cholo, bald and swarthy, who with other tightlipped men drilled holes into little silver five-centavo coins, hammered them into flat-edged circles, and filed away at them until they emerged rings—yes, rings you could wear on your finger for a few pesos saved or stolen. These rings were all the rage in the neighborhood among the boys; the men wore large ones, pounded out of fifty-centavo or even ancient one-peso coins, and all morning we would hear the wham and the

clink of hammers making something even more marvelous out of spending money. At nights Mang Cholo worked as a master cutter in the barrio's trendiest tailoring shop—a place called La Jolla, where his scissors turned idle swaths of cloth into snazzy shirt-jacs and slinky beltless pants, the tighter the better, with zippers at the hem.

I hung around these boys and these men, a plainspoken lot, unlike myself whose parents seemed to deliver every peso they made to the fancy school I went to, just so I could come home with a new four-syllable English word I could impress the older neighbors with, a word like "convocation" or "miscellaneous." While my friends were making out like snakes and eagles on the chinning bar, or wrestling each other down to the dust, I was memorizing Mark Antony's speech to the Roman mob, and daydreaming about the size of cows at state fairs in faraway Ohio. Masingki and the others didn't mind; I was smart enough not to try my vocabulary on them, and I could see that they, too, marveled at the white cotton shirt with the school patch that set me apart from them on schooldays. I was the *edukado*, their emissary to parts beyond, and as long as I didn't forget where I went home to and whom I ate fifteen-centavo *halo-halo* with, I was okay.

The only time I got into a fight with any of them was when Boknot pulled my elastic-band shorts down in front of Luzviminda, the fourteen-year-old dark beauty whom we all fervently adored, never mind that one of her incisors was missing; we all sought ways to make her smile, and maybe this was Boknot's sincere idea of humor. Or he must have gotten jealous because I had spent the afternoon squiring Luzviminda—who went to high school at the *colegio* downtown—because I was the only one who could understand and answer the questions in her new autograph book with the kind of intelligence she felt they and she deserved ("Fave combo: The Beatles!!!, the Dave Clark Five???, the Rolling StonesXXX"). Luzviminda did catechism with the younger kids; it was a word no one else could even spell. It was for her as much as for my soul that I joined the Legion of Mary—Praesidium Virgin Most Powerful—just so I could see her at her house and her parents could see me under the holiest possible pretenses, with a rosary in hand and a poem in my heart for which, for the life of me, I couldn't find the words. But it wasn't even Luzviminda I particularly remember that summer for.

That was the summer we discovered a funny photograph in the ricefields behind the barrio, the picture of a woman on top of a man,

the both of them with nothing on, and something in between. They seemed to be smiling at us, but we couldn't smile back. I still don't know what that picture was doing there in the grass, where we sat some nights to watch movies trucked over by people promoting a new brand of laundry soap. Between reels, they washed a muddy shirt in a *palanggana* and we could've offered ours, but our stains were beyond sudsy salvation and we were in a hurry to see the movie's ending, besides. That photograph, though, was more interesting than anything we'd seen onscreen. We turned it over and sideways and still the figures clung together oddly, held fast by that solid staple. We tossed coins for the picture and I actually won it, but then fear got the better of me—what if I left it in my pocket and my mother did the laundry before I remembered?—and I turned it over to Masingki, making it clear that I was doing him an inestimable favor.

One day Masingki and the other guys returned from the *camposanto* at the edge of this ricefield, howling like mad dogs and cupping their blood-speckled crotches, and Atong threw me this prideful, almost vicious look I'd never seen on him before, not even from the chinning bar. I'd come from school with another Hardy Boys mystery from the library. "What happened?" I asked Boknot, and he said, laughing, "Don't you know?"

Before that summer ended, I knew, but it wasn't quite the same for me, as it's never been since. My father said, "There's something we have to do," and we took a jeepney to a clinic where a nurse made me lie flat on a table and injected something into my penis to make it numb. I had, in fact, already willed it to be numb the second I realized that it was going to be held and fussed over by perfect strangers, be the focus of their complete attention. I felt that I would or should die of shame if it did so much as twitch or, God forbid, show the merest sign of gladness. I shut my eyes and reviewed the periodic table; a doctor did the rest, snipping here and there and tying up the raw edges with stout black thread. I stared at the bulbous result for days until the swelling passed and the stitches came off and my thing shrank back to smaller than normal and I grew accustomed to the tingly tautness down below.

We venerated Luzviminda, but it would be Leah who would give us the most discomfort, who would creep insistently into our mosquito

nets and blankets and threadbare imaginations. She was probably seventeen—we couldn't tell because she was out of school—but she looked and acted much older than all the rest of us put together, such as when she first arrived in the neighborhood from her parents' fishing village in Pangasinan. She came toting a coral-pink plastic suitcase whose handle was reinforced with a coil of string, and asked for directions to her aunt's house, which happened to be right next to ours.

I had my finger all prepared to point out Aling Roberta's and Mang Cholo's place—the one with the halo-halo stand, our three-star soda fountain—when Boknot got it into his harlequin head to direct her the other way, and Boknot was still grinning, bragging about the time when he drilled a hole through the plywood wall at the puericulture center, when Leah returned and, without saying another word, two-handedly thrashed Boknot from behind with her suitcase. The lock broke and her possessions flew all over the asphalt: a hairbrush, a deck of cards, a plastic mirror, two bars of Choc-Nut, a picture frame, stretch jeans, an apple-green blouse with little knots of rope embroidered on the sleeves, and—as hard as I tried not to look too closely—a brassiere with distended straps and something lacy that she snatched before anything else, before I could soil it with my gaze. (I knew what these things were, having studied them at leisure on many a clothesline, while reviewing my Social Studies lesson; could anyone have been more interested in Dag Hammarskjold or Trygve Lie?) I stooped and helped her collect the mess, keeping studiously to the most neutral items, not even looking her way. I handed her the hairbrush in a kind of sideward gesture and she took it briskly. Still rubbing his crown, Boknot snorted as he watched this scene—snorted at her or at me, I wasn't sure—then ran off screaming “You'll be soooorryyy!”—and again, whether he meant her or me, I couldn't say. I did blurt out “You're welcome,” although I can't remember now if Leah ever or even said “Thank you.” She perched her suitcase on her hip and marched off to her aunt's, leaving me breathless.

All my life—well, I suppose I should say all of my tenth, eleventh, and the first nine months of my twelfth year—I'd dreamed of coming across someone like my new neighbor Leah. As soon as we met I realized, with an acute but exhilarating sense of submission, that it was she who would swarm into my days and provoke the sweetest shudders to ever cross my synapses at nighttime. At school, in class, the

mere suggestion of her name—I had a teacher named Miss Lee, who otherwise had nothing to recommend a comparison to the original—would instigate in me a mad desire to rush out into the corridor and whisper into an alcove, or into the open air, those two syllables that bore the timeless shape of fancy: a dash, a plunge, a glide beyond the precipice, a desertion of all sense and breath and hope, and then, just before the crash, a lift on the wing of chance. (Miss Lee, of course, was all plummet.) And Leah had the face and body to attend on her name in almost obsequious agreement: black eyes, red lips, white cheeks, my revenant muse (my Annabel Leah), her frame, limned through the white cotton housedress she favored, singing of arches and shadows and collections of ripe summer fruit. I lavished upon Leah my choicest fantasies: we barged down the Nile, we picnicked beneath the stars, we chased flamingoes in slow motion, we waltzed merrily into oblivion, like all the English-speaking stars did at the Cine Montana behind the public market—in all of which we were both, naturally, totally naked and grinning like monkeys. I won't deny it, I do declare it: lust was a significant component of my want of Leah; I was a horny little runt even before I understood the catastrophic chain of events that could result from an erection.

I couldn't really love Leah at that point, because I felt betrothed to Luzviminda, even though neither one of us had said a word about marriage and children, let alone unbrotherly affection, to each other. We blushed a lot in each other's presence, and she looked about as whole and as luscious as an eggplant when that happened.

On the other hand, Leah spat, she screamed, she cursed, she planted her foot high up on the stool behind the ice-shaving machine, so high that boys from the next street would flock to ours at the slightest flicker of heat and order halo-halo, stares unflinching like little zombies.

"Get your ugly faces out of here!" she'd lash at them when she caught them looking between her legs.

"But we're paying customers," they'd protest, shovelling the sugar into their glasses and churning the ice into purple mush. "We paid fifteen centavos, didn't we?"

"Not for this show, you didn't." She'd scoop up the loose change on the table and stalk off to deposit them into a jar behind the counter. When the working day was over, she sat with Aling Roberta and helped her count the money. You knew what they were doing

because you could hear the clink and the roll of the coins. She liked to stack them as high as they would go and sometimes they came down in a mighty crash, which didn't amuse her aunt one bit and led to a scolding and a lecture on the value of the red centavo. Aling Roberta was very good at that—at telling Leah, and eavesdroppers like me, what honest money could buy, and I probably learned more about thrift from Aling Roberta than Leah did, with computational gems like “If you saved just five centavos every day you'd have P1.50 at the end of every month, and P18.00 at the end of every year, which is enough to buy you 120 glasses of halo-halo, did you realize that?”

One hundred and twenty glasses of the sweet stuff was mindboggling even for a halo-halo fan like me, but it was typical of Aling Roberta to figure life in those terms. I hadn't seen her wear a new dress in ages—they were all flouncy dusters with the usual mottled-brown, old-auntie patterns—and I doubted if she was seriously interested in things like buying a used car or a jeep or even a new pair of shoes, come to think of it, or of taking a trip with Mang Cholo up to Baguio and coming down with armfuls of souvenir brooms and a giant wooden fork and spoon, like my parents did. Maybe if they had children, things might have been a bit different, but you know how it is when two people get too old and too used to each other to even talk. They settle into habits and routines, and Aling Roberta's halo-halo was as regular as routines came: one heaping tablespoon of red beans, another one of kaong, yet another one of mongo, six or seven pearls of gelatin, one strip of jackfruit, one dollop of ube, one teaspoon of macapuno, two scoops of shaved ice, a tablespoon of sugar, a ribbon of Darigold Evap, and a smidgen of leche flan to top off the concoction. There was another halo-halo joint several blocks away on V. Salgado Street but it was nothing like Aling Roberta's which, everyone agreed, owed its reputation to the hint of coconut and to the texture of the ice.

When Leah took over the preparation of the ingredients we were afraid for a while that these delicate proportions would be irreparably upset, but as it turned out we had no cause for worry. Leah proved an adept apprentice and no matter how wild her manner may have seemed, she could've gone on to become a chemist or a pharmacist, given the evenness of her measurements. At least six Cafe Puro tumblers with everything but the ice and milk had to be ready and waiting

for the after-school crowd, and Leah put them up in a row behind the glass, arranging them at an angle so that anyone could see how perfectly equal they all were. That was how obsessive Leah got about her job, and I'm sure that Aling Roberta took it as a hopeless joke when, in the middle of her homily about saving centavos, Leah would nudge another pile of coins into a silly scatter.

But Leah was like that; she liked to play—and I mean, play like the un-grown-up girl she could be, when no one, or no one else, was looking. Now let me just clarify what I meant when I said that Leah liked "to play." I don't want anyone to get the wrong impression of her, especially after all I've said and after all that's happened. Even when Leah said "this show" you knew that she really hadn't meant to show anything. It was just the natural thing for her to do, a relaxed and confident sweep of the legs, unmindful of the consequences—to us, if not to her. And to tell you the honest truth I never saw much of anything myself in that place—nothing like what Boknot and the others claimed to have seen, which made me feel sick about the whole idea, though not sick enough to bring it up at confession.

I mean, I didn't think I had anything to confess, since I wasn't actively looking at or for anything like Boknot did. It was as if you were walking down the street and you saw a pedestrian get run over by a car; tragic, but how could that be your fault? Boknot contrived to slip a mirror from his sister's compact into a magazine so he could observe Leah from a better angle as she shaved the ice. I preferred to sit on the other side of the table, from where the only thing you could see was what the streaming light revealed in subtle shadow, the undulations of springy flesh beneath the fabric. In some ways it was worse than actually seeing. There I would sit with a well-thumbed copy of *The Wonderworld of Science*, pretending stiffly to be engrossed in the principles of electromagnetism, but my mind's eye was travelling up the incline of her leg, pausing at every hair and pore and molecule of sweat; at a certain point I would get all dizzy and direct my gaze at something vile and real, like a bug on the wall or the filmy water that collected in the gutter. It was my well-considered theory that Leah raised her foot to gain some leverage against the ice, which came off the truck in a huge silvery shoulder swathed in sack-cloth and prickly with rice husk. Rubbish, Boknot said to that: she needed and enjoyed the cooling

between her legs. I didn't know what to say then, but I'd done what I could to protect her innocence, and mine.

Another reason why I desisted from the flagrant voyeurism of the mob was that I had a private Leah unto myself, and not just in my dreams, either. The only object that separated Aling Roberta's house from ours was a large kaimito tree, behind and through the leaves of which, bless my stars, was Leah's room itself. On our side of the fence I was standing at the window in the little room that my mother used for her sewing machine and for storing the odds and ends that come with years of moving from place to place. It was, in fact, while looking for an old toy tank whose magnets I needed that—sensing motion in idle space—I glanced out the window and saw Leah reaching behind her back to undo her blouse. And that was only the beginning.

I'm not sure if Mama herself took notice of what lay across us, but a new curtain came up that window, cut from the same scraps as my shorts and my sister's pajamas. Thankfully my mother sold stamps at the post office in the *municipio*, which meant that I had an hour every morning, before I left for school, to watch Leah rise, and dress, and prepare herself for another day of shaving ice. Once I thought I saw her writing letters—when she sat on her bed, you couldn't tell what her hands were doing, but I could see her mouthing the words—and another time I saw her cutting pictures out of a magazine with a pair of scissors. I suppose she kept her window open because of the heat; she was always fanning herself with one hand while combing her hair with the other, a trickier feat than it sounds. At some point she acquired a boxy Avegon transistor radio, and I could hear the tinny tribulations of the fictional family whose turns of fortune she kept up with: "*Sumuko ka na, Arnulfo! Walang idudulot sa iyo ang krimen kundi ang nagbabagang parusa ng impyerno!*" In music she favored Cliff Richard, whom she couldn't have understood, as neither, at that point, did I: "*Ti voglio culare, culare . . .*" I came to know her so well this way that I dreaded the prospect of actually talking to her, for fear of revealing something I could only have learned by illicit means. Although she herself looked out her window now and then—her slightest forward movement would cause me to jump behind the wall, then inch my way back to the curtain's edge, behind the leaves—she always did so with trusting, unfocused eyes, as if nothing stood out there but goodness, or punks she could keep at bay with a broom or a flyswatter. I felt more threat-

ened by stray characters: one day I saw Mang Cholo pass beneath the kaimito tree, his crown gleaming and the partly singed carcass of a chicken swinging from his grasp; and one weekend my mother rushed in looking for a spool of khaki thread; we startled each other, and I had to make like she had broken into my own search for a back issue of *The Asia Magazine*.

Eventually I did get to talk to Leah, a few times, and like I said, it wasn't easy. Sometimes she looked over my shoulder at the things I brought with me to read over halo-halo, and made annoying remarks like "Speaking Inglis bery pun" or "Hardy Boys, kanto boys." Boknot would giggle and they would wink at each other and the whole absurd conspiracy of it, of him and her, would infuriate me. I didn't mean to insult her and I knew she could read; I just felt like I had no proper way of sniping back.

Life took another lurch forward when I confirmed, with my own eyes, that Luzviminda had gotten herself what I suppose was a boyfriend; saw them in church, too, tugging at each other's fingers and looking positively dopey, between the *Kyrie* and the *Christe eleison*, behind the gilded column that supported St. Martin de Porres. I'd seen the guy at one of those basketball tournaments where one barrio's players wear yellow and the other barrio's wear blue, and they get some atrociously made-up girl in a color-matched miniskirt to march ahead of them so they can stare at her legs all day; I heard he went to Mapua and played center-forward on the high school team, and I was willing to bet a week's allowance that he couldn't tell you what happened at Bretton Woods or what stood at Panmunjom if his life depended on it, but Luzviminda held his hand like he owned the world—or, at least, the Philippines. Disgusting as it was, I couldn't blame her, of course, despite my assumption that she would wait for me to put on some inches and grow a decent mop of hair and then, realizing that the time had come, she would seize my hands, look into my eyes, and whisper an ardent "Yes."

In truth I was no longer sure that this was what I wanted, and Luzviminda could have done nothing more prosaic and yet also nothing more liberative than to pair up with that six-foot freak. I had to admit that I had fallen seriously out of love with her in the time that I had grown to appreciate Leah's complexity of character. Leah still

never failed to stir a quickening in my groin, but she was becoming more than that; I found exquisite relief in my imagination but the reality of her lingered, for which there seemed to be nothing my palm could do. I took it upon myself to understand her—while, to make the most of things, I would educate her as well, spark her interest and hope in a world far larger than our pokey neighborhood and that of her radio soaps.

It looked like this would happen—and that many wondrous things would follow—when I ran into her in the market one Saturday, waiting for a tricycle and lugging two heavy bags full of what I surmised were the raw ingredients of a week's confections. As far as I knew it was Aling Roberta who did the marketing, but it was clear that she had begun to trust her niece with most of the chores around the house and with the business. I had just stepped out of the moviehouse myself; *Mary Poppins* was showing, twinned with an Italian movie whose title I forgot, but which involved international jewel thieves sneaking into a top-security museum and making off with an emerald-encrusted dagger. I was still wondering whether an umbrella or a scimitar suited my profile best when I saw Leah, engaged as usual in an argument with a tricycle driver who refused to leave with her as his sole passenger.

"The tricycle seats two," he was saying. "You pay for both seats, or we wait. Or you take another tricycle. Not too many people go where you're going."

"I am!" I cried, and slid into the cab beside her. She carried one bag on her lap and she tucked the other beneath her legs, forcing them out. I nearly fainted when her skin touched mine—I was wearing my gym shorts, and thankfully, since my operation, I had begun wearing briefs on a fairly regular basis, whenever I left the house—although she gave no sign of any awareness of the fact. I tried to curl away to give her more space but the tricycle kept slipping into a rut on the road, nudging us back together. It was about a fifteen-minute ride to our part of town and ten minutes passed quickly in utter silence.

Finally, as we passed the camposanto, I found my voice and croaked, "That's a big load you have there."

"Yes," she said. "It is."

"I don't see you in the market very often." Our driver waved at an oncoming tricycle and I did not know why I felt like ducking. Instantly

I berated myself: what the hell's the matter with you, do you want to be seen with her or not? My mind was racing forward to the consequences.

"Why should you?" And then, a shade more kindly: "I mean, how often do you go to market yourself?"

"Often enough. Actually, I was watching a movie—a couple of movies. At the Cine Montana—"

"Of course you were. English movies." She scratched a spot on her ankle and I felt the soft brush of her knuckles against my thigh. "I prefer the Victoria myself. I like drama, heavy drama—"

"Yes, I know—"

"You do?"

"I mean, doesn't everyone?"

"Do you?"

"No," I had to admit, against all my desire to please her. "I like science fiction—"

"What's that?"

"It's—it's books and movies about going to the moon, or to the planets, things like that. Or maybe the Martians come to us, and bring strange diseases, create new problems—take over our minds and bodies!"

She chuckled. "I can't imagine why anyone would want to take over mine!"

I had an answer to that, but all too suddenly we were on familiar ground—the turn off the concrete highway into the pitted asphalt of our barrio. Leah was looking at the ricefields in the distance, perhaps marvelling, as I myself sometimes did, how quickly town and country became one and the other in this crazy-cut terrain. I had begun to sweat against her leg, or she against mine, but she betrayed no great discomfort, and how I wished at that minute that we had lived another ten or twenty miles away, over the stubbled horizon. While she looked away I looked at her, at her brilliantined hair, at the collar of the blouse I had watched her choose and button up many times. And then the wind blew my way; she turned and caught me staring, and I mumbled a lame remark about having been born with one ear smaller than the other. Somehow she found that funny and I felt relieved.

The tricycle rattled to a stop and I offered gentleman-like to pay her fare but she refused. I helped her drag her purchases into the back of

the shop, just waiting to hear Aling Roberta's shrill admonitions about handling the merchandise, but there was none.

"She's gone for the week," Leah explained as we stacked the jars of ube and kaong into a cabinet. "She'd been wanting to visit her sister in Calasiao—Manang Marta, they say she's dying."

"Of what?"

"Hm, tuberculosis, I think—or tetanus, one of those."

"They're very different diseases."

"The end's the same, isn't it? Here, that box goes here. Thanks very much."

"It's nothing, I—I'm your neighbor—after all." I saw a calendar on the wall, the kind with the big blue numbers that the Chinese hardware stores gave out every Christmas to go with the cotton T-shirt. "When's your next birthday?"

"March 26."

"That wasn't too long ago—"

"No. It was right after I left home and came here."

"Do you miss home?"

"Why not, there's people there—"

"Who, a boyfriend?" I could barely hear myself, although I could very clearly make out the clatter and the bell of the *sorbetero's* cart on the street outside.

"None of your business." She reached into the bottom of the bag and retrieved her shopping list. "It's not a bad place for raising a family."

"Aren't you too young to be thinking about those things?"

"Look," she said in her best big-girl pose, cocking a hip, "you know the girls I played jackstones and *sipa* with? They became mothers at fourteen, fifteen. It's nothing unusual."

"And is that what you want to happen?"

"Heavens, no! I'd like to stay here and save up for two, three years, and go on to high school—"

"Why?"

"Why not, do I look so dumb—"

"I mean why just two or three years, why just high school? It's a big, big world! I'd like to go to Europe—"

"I'd like to become a nurse. Or even a doctor. We have a cousin who became a nurse. She now works in America, in Chicago—"

"Shee—" I corrected her. "Shee-kah-go. You listen to me and you'll become a nurse. In Chicago." And then, thoroughly emboldened, I said what I really wanted to say. "Do you think we can go see a movie together sometime?"

She was about to put down a box of canned milk and I froze when she paused to look up at me and all of my not-quite thirteen years. "What did you say?"

"See a movie. Maybe a science-fiction movie. So I can explain things."

"What things?"

"The world, the future, whatever. Life on other planets. What do you think—about the movie?"

"Well," she said, reaching for that ankle again, "I never had a brother. Maybe. We'll see."

It wasn't what I expected her to say, but it seemed like the closest I would ever get to a yes from her—or the closest I would ever get to her—and for the moment, it was enough. It had to do, because the next moment, Mang Cholo came in all sweaty from his morning's work at the local smithy, and without so much as a glance at us he peeled off and tossed his T-shirt into a washbasin in the sink. I excused myself and ran off to invite Boknot to steal diamonds from the pawnshop next to the police station.

From that point on, strangely enough, I could no longer bear to look, and I stopped visiting the window. Or rather I stopped peering through curtain and canopy into my neighbor's person. I took her "maybe" seriously and waited for a good double-bill to come up at the Montana, to impress her with; but it was Lee van Cleef all week and the most promising prospect I could identify—*The Planet of the Apes*—was still a month away. No matter; I would wait. Leah got word that Aling Roberta was staying for yet another week in Calasiao; her sister was holding on, thanks to a herbalist's prescription, but one never knew. Leah ran the halo-halo shop like it was her own. She brought the radio out onto the table and was amazed that I could actually sing the words to Cliff Richard's song: ". . . Un granello di sabbia, così tu, nella nebbia . . ." Read the songbook, I told them, it's all there.

And then one day when I was feeling surly, maybe because the summer was ending and I was due to go to a new school, a high school

you took a battery of special math and language tests for, she collected my fifteen centavos and asked, just to be nice, "Why so glum?" I couldn't answer straight away, and Boknot said, out of the blue, "He thinks you spend too much time brushing your hair in the morning," and she stopped and looked at me with stricken and then knowing and angry eyes. "That's not true!" I cried, "I haven't been—" but she had already fled to the back of the shop, leaving my money behind.

She wouldn't speak to me after that, and when I dared look out the window again, purely out of concern, her side was solidly shut, the capiz squares glinting back like so many dead eyes. After a few days I stopped checking, and busied myself with choosing the fabric for the charcoal-gray long pants my new school's uniform required. My mother took me twice to the cloth dealers in the dry goods section but I couldn't make up my mind, and we scheduled a special trip to Divisoria to get the business done with. I thought I saw Leah and her shopping bags during one of those market visits, but it could have been someone else. I came around to convincing myself that I had done nothing truly wrong in respect of Leah, and her importance diminished in my scheme of things. I began to recall the parts of her that were simpler to deal with, the Leah I was silly to forget, and my incipient manhood revived itself with a vengeance. Just who did she think she was? I marched into her place and put my money down and opened my book. She served me and lingered behind me for a second as if she was making up another silly joke about my education, but she must've sensed how tight my posture was, like Atong's on the *baras*, and soon enough she backed away without a word. Well, that was just fine by me. I could've complained that there was too much cheap kaong in my glass and too little of the ube, but I let it pass.

How could I have known what was going on? And what exactly was a twelve-year-old boy supposed to do? She'd shut her window, so there was nothing for me to see, and if she wanted me to do anything about it, like telling my folks or calling the police, she could've told me herself, couldn't she? Or simpler yet, she could've screamed. That's what got me about it. She didn't have to wait until Aling Roberta returned—almost a month later than she said she would, all puffy-eyed and wrapped in black—to start screaming. When they did, it was all too late: the three of them thrashing and cursing and crying and

throwing what could have been jars of sweet young coconut around the house.

We were having our supper and watching TV at the same time, and as much as we tried to do both, we managed neither, and my mother hurried my sister to the toilet and to bed. My father lit a cigarette to thicken the air and put his smelly feet up on the coffee table, and my mother turned up the Zenith's volume—was it *Two for the Road* or *Pancho Loves Tita* that was showing? definitely something about two's—and they carried on like it was just another TV drama our neighbors were busy watching.

"How could you do this to us? How could you? After all we've done!"

"Why are you asking me? Ask him! Go on, ask him!"

"You lying, thieving whore!"

"He was going to kill me! Everytime he did it he put a knife to my throat and he said he was going to kill me. . . ." And then a ragged wail of utter desolation, followed by heaving sobs, a door slammed shut, more objects crashing, another long and largely unintelligible harangue.

". . . Cops . . . kill . . . swear to God . . . three times . . . witness . . . kill him. . . prison . . . how . . . I swear . . . again. . . ."

My mother sat petrified, staring at the TV screen. My father flicked his ashes over his shoulder, out the window, and said to no one in particular, "Did we get any mail this morning? I've been expecting a premium notice from the insurance company." And then he looked at me and said, "You should put on more weight, and get more sleep, if you plan to succeed as well in athletic pursuits."

We sat there for a while until the furor subsided, and then, during the commercials, I got up to visit the storage room, announcing that I was going to look for the shoe brush. It seemed the right thing to say, and my mother nodded in approval.

I drew the curtain aside and saw that her window, too, was open, although the light was out. I don't know how but I felt certain that she was there in deepest shadow, that she was watching me, balled up in pain or anger or sorrow or whatever it was she was going through. I made no more pretense of hiding and stood squarely in the middle of the frame. I wanted her to see me, I wanted to tell her and to ask her so many things, like "Are you really going to have a baby?" and

"You won't kill yourself, will you?" The previous summer's big discovery had been a shirtless body on the river, floating on its face, which the police from the next town assured us was one of their own. I imagined that I heard her whimpering. I imagined that she was thinking about her childhood friends, and what she would have to tell them. I held my breath and craned my neck to catch the merest rustle in her room but received absolutely nothing beyond what I myself emitted, and my frustration overtook my other feelings. It didn't seem right for me not to be able to know and be a part of the rest of the story. I could've been her witness, her champion, if she'd come to me and told me, but she didn't. When she left the next morning I was still asleep and drooling mindlessly on my pillow. I asked Boknot afterward if she'd said anything, or left a note or a provincial address, but he shrugged his shoulders and tried to mooch a cigarette from me instead. My father worked in Customs and kept cartons of blue-seal Salems, and now and then I slipped Boknot a stick as a friendly gesture.

That was the last anyone in the neighborhood saw of Leah, tugging the same coral-pink suitcase she'd appeared with—just a few months earlier, but what a long summer that was. She left, Masingki said, in a tricycle. Mang Cholo himself vanished soon afterwards into God knew where—taking, they said, jarfuls of money with him, and they weren't talking about loose change; Aling Roberta's halo-halo never recovered its old zip, and she tried selling banana cues for a while but our banana-cue allegiance had long been pledged to Sally, near the barber shop. During my second year of high school, we moved to an apartment on Santolan Road, a few steps closer to the center of the spiral universe.

These days I hold a job that has me flying several times a year to destinations on the map that you couldn't have found even in my Social Studies texts: places with names like Lusaka, Irkutsk, and Volendam. I became a software engineer, although my bosses, based in Dusseldorf, soon realized that I was better employed in sales, paid on commission. Besides English I can now speak German, some Japanese, and even a bit of Russian. I married a dentist from Cebu, but we split up years ago and the kids seem happy to stay with her, although they rightfully expect some presents and a card from wherever I happen to be at Christmas. Sometimes that'll be in the bungalow I keep in Parañaque,

close to the airport, and just as likely it'll be in a two-star sales rep's hotel in Amsterdam, a freezing five minutes' walk from the Central Station.

Sometimes I'll be alone, and sometimes not. Sometimes, alone or not, my hand will steal down there beneath the blanket to seek the quick relief of what we once miserably confessed as self-abuse. Quick: but to me never simple—never since Leah drove me to wonder, as I exploded into space and spawned planetfuls of shivering little me's, how something that felt so good could go so wrong.