

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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Philippine Studies vol. 53, no. 2&3 (2005): 226–236

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Nenita's Flight

FRAN NG

As the cabin lights dimmed, Nenita reclined her seat and made a mental inventory of the presents she'd packed for relatives back home. They weren't much, mostly last-minute gifts from the Tabac: Mozart chocolate balls, bars of Nivea soap, and pens with tiny skiers gliding back and forth in plastic tubes. Nenita wanted to count the shillings in her wallet one last time, but Astrid's head on her shoulder kept her from reaching for her bag beneath the seat.

Nenita glanced at her eight-year-old daughter sleeping with her thumb in her mouth. Astrid's closeness calmed Nenita, who took it as a truce that washed away any tension between them. Still she bristled upon recalling her daughter's outburst in the master's bedroom the other night.

She'd been folding Gunter's trousers beside the open suitcase on the bed. The TV was blaring in the living room, so Astrid's presence startled her. She couldn't tell how long Astrid has been standing quietly behind her.

"What is it, Astrid? You miss Papa?"

"You're giving his clothes away?"

"Of course not," Nenita said, wiping her daughter's cheeks. "I was just folding his pants to keep the closet neat."

"But you made me pack my old toys. I want to leave them behind. I want you to leave Papa's things behind."

Nenita hugged her daughter to hide her own distress. She understood her daughter's grief, but wasn't sure why she too began to cry.

Nenita used to tell Gunter that she was afraid to fly—her excuse that finally made him drop the idea of spending a holiday in Bohol. She wasn't sure if Gunter had believed her, or if he'd just grown tired of pressing the issue to return together to her hometown.

"Mama is afraid to fly," five-year-old Astrid had blurted to the Schwarzlars, a retired German couple with whom they often lunched at Strobl, the lakeshore resort town four hours away from Vienna, where they spent three summers in a row. Ursula Schwarzler had asked why they vacationed here instead of the white-sand beaches of the Philippines. Feeling as though her dark skin exposed her, Nenita let her daughter speak for her, as she munched her vanilla wafer dipped in ice cream.

The Schwarzlars were the only couple with whom she and Gunter had ever socialized. Around them Nenita felt at ease. Once when Gunter ordered a glass of wine for his wife, Ursula said, "Oh, let her drink Coca-Cola. Everyone in the Philippines drinks that." For eight years the Schwarzlars had lived in Manila, where Andreas worked for the German Embassy. They enjoyed practicing the little Tagalog they knew with Nenita, who was glad to answer simple questions such as "How are you?" and "How much is that?"

Ursula even carried a piece of Nenita's history without her knowing. Once she wore a puka-shell necklace and instantly Nenita felt foamy water lapping at her ankles, and cool, wet sand possessing her feet. When she was a child, Nenita could gather a bag full of shells in an afternoon—more if the tide was low. The sea offered both sets of things she needed: plastic bags and seashells, which she and her sister Weng strung into necklaces, bracelets, and anklets using excess nylon from their father's fishing nets. Nenita remembered the gritty feel of shells flowing between her fingers and the rattle they made in the basin as she washed them clean of sand. She remembered fixating on the bulge of cash in the apron pocket of her mother, who returned to their hut at sunset after peddling the ornaments on the resort side of the island. Nenita always considered those shells mere stones of the sea and wondered why the tourists bought them. But now in this holiday town enclosed by the Alps, she understood their worth as souvenirs.

The cabin lights came back on and trays clattered in the galley. Soon the flight attendants rolled the food carts up the aisle. As the smiling

attendant handed Nenita a tray, she asked, "For your husband and daughter, chicken or beef?"

The casual question caught Nenita off-guard. She glanced at the German stranger asleep beside her, and just as casually replied with a shrug. "Any, thanks." Nenita tried to appear unaffected, not bothering to correct the attendant nor wake up the man, but the woman's off-hand assumption felt like a gash on her skin.

The bearded German with mottled skin reminded her of Fr. Rosen, the aging priest who'd retired at the church beside her school in Bohol. Everyday on her way to the schoolroom, he sat by the large capiz window of the priests' quarters. He always looked dour and never stood up when she and her schoolmates sang the national anthem in the yard.

What bothered her wasn't just her emerging childhood fear of the German priest. A side-glance at Astrid told Nenita that they did make a family portrait on row 52 A-C. Besides, her seatmate was probably just a decade older than Gunter, whom she had married at eighteen. The stranger even made a helpful accessory: had he sat elsewhere, the flight attendant might have thought she was Astrid's nanny.

On Astrid's first day of kindergarten, Nenita wasn't sure who felt more anxious. At the school gate, her three-year-old clutched her mother's coat and peered at the unfamiliar crowd of children. "Go on, Astrid, you'll make lots of friends, promise," Nenita said. She knew she meant it for herself as well, but as she surveyed the swarm of pale mothers infinitely taller than her 4'10" frame, she lost faith.

One of the women eventually approached her. "I'm Hannah," said a smiling redhead who extended her hand. The gap between Hannah's two front teeth made her seem friendly. She chattered about her son Jonas, how anxious she was because she was starting a job soon, and could Nenita help her find a nanny? "Or I could double your salary," Hannah joked.

Since that day, Nenita couldn't wander in the streets of Vienna without noticing how different she looked. Only the middle-aged Austrian women wore their hair in pigtails coiled around their ears. But that hairdo went with the dirndls they occasionally wore. Nenita's own thick braid reached her waist, and it began to feel like a tail that sprouted at her nape.

Even her younger sister eventually lopped off her long, wavy hair. After Weng graduated from the two-year computer course for which Nenita had paid, she'd sent Nenita a picture of herself with coworkers at her new job in Manila. "Everybody here calls me Rose," Weng wrote. Her chopped hair fell in soft waves at her chin.

"Is that Weng? Her hair's brown now?" Gunter asked, peering at the photo over Nenita's shoulder. She thought he'd fallen asleep while reading his book.

"She's even changed her name to Rose," Nenita muttered, dropping her head on the plump pillows stacked against the headboard. "What if I change my name? How does Neni sound?"

"But you've already changed it. You're now Nenita Zimmerman."

"Then what if I get a haircut? Look how pretty Weng looks."

Gunter patted her thick braid. "You look better like this," he said, slowly unraveling her mane. He parted the mass at her nape and let the untrimmed locks cascade over her chest, like oil slicked over her white cotton nightgown. Gunter rolled on top of her, his potbelly jiggling and crushing her torso. Yet this time it wasn't his mass that constricted her breathing but the weight of her own hair.

The seatbelt sign flashed as the plane began to quiver. The turbulence shook the orange juice in Nenita's cup and knocked Astrid's colored markers off her tray table. After retrieving the pens that had fallen, Astrid stashed them in the seat pocket and tightly squeezed Nenita's hand. "Don't be afraid, Mama," she whispered. "This will be over soon." Her chubby fingers reached for the gold medallion on Nenita's neck. Astrid held up the tiny image of the Virgin Mary for her mother to kiss.

Nenita realized that Astrid must still be convinced that she had a fear of flying. But why hadn't Astrid mentioned it three weeks ago when Nenita announced she'd booked this flight? "Your grandma can't wait to meet you," Nenita had said, stirring spaghetti sauce in the pan, keeping her back to her daughter who was seated on the kitchen counter. She braced herself for Astrid's questions: "Why are we leaving now that Papa's gone? Aren't you afraid to fly?" Instead her daughter only asked who'd take care of Snow, their Persian cat, while they were away.

Nenita almost wished that Astrid had asked those questions, just so she could get the answers off her chest. She wanted to say that

Gunter's death had hit her like a jolt; his passing had made urgent the need to reclaim loved ones left behind. His death had lifted a load off her, giving her the lightness to fly.

When Astrid was a baby, Nenita made a ritual of breastfeeding her while reading aloud the letters from Bohol. Nenita awoke much earlier than Gunter, so she could have read her mail privately as soon as it arrived with *Der Standard*. But she waited for Gunter to leave for his chemistry classes at Universität Wien. She waited till she'd wiped the table clear of eggshells, crumbs, and teabags. She waited till Astrid had awakened and had her lemon-scented bath. Then she played Filipino cassettes all morning. She felt more at home reading her mother's news aloud with Regine Velasquez or Ric Segreto crooning in the background.

Her mother's early letters mostly chronicled the steady renovation of their house. By her fifth year in Vienna, it no longer resembled the hut where Nenita had grown up. Her family had even built an extension to accommodate Danilo, Nenita's older brother, who moved back in with his wife and children.

Gunter liked seeing photos of the Bartes' evolving house. She guessed it was his way of accounting for the money he wired to them. He never grew tired of hearing about some new purchase they made—a refrigerator, a TV. Even before he and Nenita left for Vienna, the renovations had already begun. He'd had running water and a toilet installed in their hut. The dirt floor was vinyl-tiled. The thin plywood walls received their first coat of paint—just in time for the wedding reception in the yard.

Gunter decided to host it there so the whole barrio could come. The neighbors hung the bunting reserved for fiestas on poles along the road. The wailing of pigs alerted them to the bounty of the coming feast. But it was the Bartes' new Aiwa karaoke that fully blasted the news of the party to their farthest neighbor.

Months before his wedding day, Gunter had been already well known in the barrio. He'd arrived in June at the tail end of the tourist season, just as the rains began. But everyone had come to know him as the pen pal of Perla Sandoval, who worked at one of the resorts. She was Nenita's neighbor, with whom Nenita did laundry at the common water pump. Often as the two girls squatted with their shins hitting their tin tubs, the unmarried men of the barrio came by to ask

Perla out on a date in Tagbilaran. "I'm not available," she'd say, "I have a German boyfriend." The men's smirks made Nenita figure that they didn't really mean to take her out; they just enjoyed hearing Perla boast of her absent foreign lover. "Lucky you," Perla said to her, shaking suds off her hands, "the boys leave you alone since you have Manny around."

Before she left for Vienna, Nenita packed everything she owned in a bright, woven bag. Aside from her clothes, she packed old issues of showbiz magazines, a tiny resin Virgin Mary, and cassettes of Filipino pop songs that Weng had bought for her. Nenita also packed a slim album of family photos, and behind one shot she tucked a picture of Manny Cruz.

It was a snapshot of her and Manny sitting at the stern of his father's fishing boat. Their cheeks touched as he wrapped his arms around her. He wore the shades she'd bought for him, which made him look like one of the teen idols on *That's Entertainment*. Behind them gleamed the ocean fading into the sky.

An American girl had taken that photo. She was traveling with her friend from Manila, and the pair had commissioned Manny's boat to take them to Balicasag, a nearby island, for snorkeling.

Nenita had come as though she were just tagging along. It was mid-day, and Manny steered the boat toward a small fishing vessel in the open sea. He would just say hello to his friends, he said, but as they got closer to the men hauling nets, he asked the girls if they wanted to have a picnic of freshly caught swordfish.

Manny docked his boat on the eastern tip of the island, away from its resort, and led the girls to a makeshift eatery with a table, next to the hut of Tia Muning, who lent Nenita her pots and pans. Nenita stewed some of the fish in a sour broth of tomatoes and tamarind. She grilled the rest over a charcoal flame, and diced and soaked the third portion in a bowl of coconut vinegar. They ate the three-style swordfish with the girls on the shore beneath a roof of woven palm.

More than the tip she received, it was spending a whole day with Manny that Nenita loved. After lunch, he took them back on the boat and dropped anchor in what seemed like the middle of nowhere. The boat teetered between a pink, coral garden, and the dark, subterranean blue into which the reef plummeted. When the girls had snorkeled far and looked like dots in the horizon, Manny and Nenita dipped into the

sea. They kissed behind the boat, swaying against the bamboo outrigger that bobbed over the deep end. Their feet danced in the cavernous blue, the bottom of which was more distant than they could imagine.

Once they took Perla and Gunter on the boat. After Manny had dropped anchor at the same spot, Gunter hardly swam away from the vessel. He held on to the mossy anchor line and spied the clownfish and parrotfish darting at his feet. He was oblivious to Perla's cries to swim farther away beside her. Instead Gunter called Nenita to jump into the water. When she was in the sea, he lost interest in the fish. He told Nenita that she was dazzling as a mermaid.

Among Nenita's tail-end memories of Manny, a watermelon figure—dark green and heavy with the promise of red, bursting sweetness. She was steaming mussels and frying rice at the backroom of the hut. Manny dropped by looking for her, but Nenita's mother told him she wasn't there.

"Is that a new electric fan?" Nenita heard Manny asking. "Mang Ben had cash to spare after getting a motor for his boat?" Manny asked, referring to Nenita's father. But her mother only thanked him for the watermelon and didn't let him in.

When all the soft meat had been plucked from the mussel shells and the rice bowl was scraped clean, Nenita's father sliced the hefty fruit. He asked Nenita when she'd see Gunter again, and her mother added that she made a better match for him than Perla did. Danilo and Weng teased Nenita about the German sausage she'd get to taste. As they spit the seeds into their palms and let melon juice dribble down their chins, Nenita waited for one of them to say they appreciated Manny's gift. When she cleared the table, she cupped the seeds in her palm for a long time.

Astrid gazed out the oval window of the plane. Her hair was slightly tousled and she paid no heed to the crusty drool on her chin. She looked as she did on weekend mornings when she'd just awakened and didn't need to rush to school. On those Sunday mornings, Mozart's sonatas floated across the Zimmerman household, carrying the heady whiffs of Gunter's pipe and apple strudel in the oven. Nenita let her daughter hover in her dreamlike state, and never pressed upon her the matters of the day. She kept from asking what Astrid wanted for

breakfast or which outfit she'll wear to church. Instead Nenita sat next to her and asked if she remembered her dream.

Nenita asked that familiar question now, and Astrid leaned her head on her mother's shoulder. "I dreamt of Papa," she murmured, her hair brushing Nenita's cheek. Nenita felt Astrid bristling with Gunter's presence; she hoped her daughter wouldn't move away. She waited for her daughter to tell her about the dream, but Astrid was silent and kept it to herself.

Astrid sat up again and gazed out the cabin window. "You think Papa's in the clouds, Mama? You think he's flying with us?"

Nenita looked out into the oval frame of sky where clouds rippled like white foam on blue water. "He's our angel," she replied, "he's always been."

When Nenita arrived in Vienna, Gunter took her around the city. He taught her how to buy train tickets at the Bahnhof and which bus to take to the Alpha Sprachinstitut where she was to study German. They spent a day at the Rathausplatz where Nenita ordered Vietnamese noodles from one of the food stalls selling international cuisine. Gunter let her sit on his jacket that he laid on the grass. They fed pigeons and watched tourists taking photos and young couples ambling, holding hands.

In those days, Nenita pretended she was a tourist, and it was easy to write her mother letters filled with the splendor of Vienna: how marble statues on building rooftops seemed to elevate the sky; how white swans glided in the lakes of parks; and how weekly, Gunter let her pick out a pastry from the Confiterei, where Nenita drowned her loneliness in chocolate.

Over the years, Nenita peopled the streets of Vienna with the barrio folk of home. She imagined naked children traipsing in the snow. Her mother sometimes sat with her in the kitchen, reminding her how much vinegar to use to soak chicken for adobo. She went window-shopping with Weng, though she'd befriended Filipino nurses who tried to invite her to their Episcopalian Bible meetings.

It was Manny's face she saw most often. Once, she caught sight of him buying cigarettes at the Tabac. Another time he was lining up to catch a train. When she wandered into the Schönbrunn Palace in the Hietzing suburb, Nenita thought she saw him trimming the tall bushes

in its stately gardens. Another time in Salzburg with Astrid, Nenita bumped into him while crossing the street. "The walking man is green, Mama," Astrid said, tugging her hand. Nenita lost him in a sea of pedestrians walking their dogs and tourists looking for the house of Mozart. Later she mustered the courage to approach him, and he told her what she'd heard about him wasn't true.

Like a village census, her mother's constant letters accounted for everyone in the barrio except Manny Cruz. Each year Nenita got an update on who won their annual beauty pageant and which girl claimed to have an American boyfriend getting her a green card. Nenita knew who was raising the most pigs and who owed that person the most debt. Nenita knew whose huts the yearly monsoons toppled, and whose daughters were going away to be domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Finally, Weng mentioned his name in her letter. She said he still lived in their barrio and plied his father's boat, mentioning nothing more.

One cold morning, Nenita received mail with an unfamiliar scrawl. It was the letter she craved, a stationery of Alona Kew Beach Resort, which enclosed a photograph of Perla Sandoval in the arms of a hairy man. She'd met Ubaldo Moretti, a former stockbroker from Milan who wanted to marry her. They would run a pizzeria together in Boracay. It was too bad what happened to Manny, wrote Perla. When Nenita reached that line, she glazed over the rest of the letter, catching only phrases before it all sank in.

Perhaps she glazed over the news to retain some sense of propriety, the way people would speak in hushed tones when they mentioned something shameful. Perhaps she wanted to hold back from gorging on the details Perla fed her, though it was something for which she'd long hungered. The bottle in Manny's hand. Wandering into the beachfront of resorts at night. Belting love songs. Looking for Gunter. The knife. The fights. The frightened tourists.

When Nenita reached the line that mentioned Tia Esther, she read the letter slowly. The woman's hut glowed, with candles casting shadows on the statues of saints whose names were lost even to the healer. She'd recite chants and rub potions on the ailing bodies of her neighbors, and with braided palm leaves, she'd whip away the demons that possessed them.

After repeated visits to Tia Esther's hut, Manny's demon apparently left him. One of the dive shops on the island even hired him to take out scuba divers on his boat. He'd drop anchor in the middle of nowhere, his boat teetering between the sunlit bloom of coral and the plunge into the dense, delirious blue. Once he took out a large group of divers from Manila who took longer than usual to surface. The red dive flag eventually waved at him in the horizon, toward which he drove his boat. Manny counted only nine heads bobbing in the water though ten had gone down earlier.

Another group of divers found the missing diver's body, swept by the current miles away. Perla wrote that the dive master was at fault for having taken a novice diver into a fierce-current dive. The dive group was also to blame, since no one noticed the girl was gone until they had surfaced. But then they tried to figure out how she died. They'd found the hose to her breathing apparatus detached from her oxygen tank, so they surmised that when she was deep underwater, she must have run out of air and tried to open the knob of her tank strapped to her back. But in panic she must have turned the wrong knob, which unclashed the hose from her tank. At the shore she already must have opened her tank, which filled her regulator with enough oxygen for the descent. But in the boat when Manny helped strap on her gear, he must have absent-mindedly closed the tank, thinking he was releasing the air. So they pinned it on Manny, and without Perla saying it, Nenita felt sucked into the spiral of blame.

Nenita wasn't sure if it was something she'd eaten or the constant turbulence that pierced her gut. Or her karma for having said she was afraid to fly. Or teetering between a future that was now her past, and a distant dream to which she would soon wake up.

She rummaged for the white paper bag in the airline-seat pocket. She pulled out the earplugs, newspapers, and in-flight magazine, but the bag wasn't there. Frantically she flipped through the magazine, hoping to find it tucked between the pages. But before she could find it, Nenita puked. She puked on the spread of a beach at sunset. She puked on the photo of a girl with a sampaguita in her hair. She puked on the cuff-sleeve of her German seatmate and blubbered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," while the German gave her his handkerchief and told her it was okay. Finally Astrid found the paper bag and the attendant came