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The Art of Understatement

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The Art of Understatement

CRISTINA PANTOJA HIDALGO

AURORA JIMENEZ-RUBIO'S STORY was, in some ways, surprisingly good. The language, in particular. Beautiful prose . . . limpid, graceful, with none of the occasional awkwardness, the jarring notes, the slips in syntax, in diction, in idiom. Delfin Malay was tempted to say that it was almost too flawless.

He did say it—to the class—and caught the quizzical lift of Aurora Rubio's eyebrows, the unasked question: was it possible, Professor, for anything to be "too flawless"?

Malay repeated the word "almost," underlining it: one *almost* missed the peculiar turn of phrase that marked a text as surely as the accent marked one's speech, announcing it to be Filipino. Had it not been for the characters' names, the places where they ate their meals, went to work, played their games, places specifically identified, the story might have been mistaken for American.

Her language served her well for the evocation of mood, the exploration of nuances. One felt the subtlety of her mind, the delicacy of her sensibility.

However, Malay said—and here was the problem—one came away dissatisfied. Something was missing. One had expected something that had not happened.

"Would anyone care to comment?" Malay asked the class. "Do you agree that something is missing, Sara?"

The girl reached for her bangs and gave them a slight tug. "I think . . . it's emotion."

"Emily?"

"I don't agree. I think there is emotion in the story. But maybe the heroine is trying to suppress it, trying to suppress her feelings."

"Alex?"

"It might be the focus. We get x number of pages with things which are not really relevant. I mean, they're beautifully written, but they're not too important to what the story is all about. Then we get the confrontation in fewer pages. It's a question of proportion."

"Dino?"

Dino was usually the harshest. But now he fidgeted, tapping his ball pen on his copy of the story, and smiling uneasily at Aurora.

They all liked her. Malay had guessed they would be kinder to her than to each other.

"I have the feeling that she—the protagonist—isn't quite sure of her own emotions," Dino said. "Which may be why we don't get a good idea of what these are."

"But you all feel the emotions *are* there? Fair enough. Is what we have here an example of understatement carried too far?"

His students considered this for a moment. In the beginning of the semester, Malay had made a strong case for understatement as a strategy in fiction, knowing well that his students were likely to err on the side of extravagance.

"Understatement is emotion reined in," he reminded them. "Is this what we have here? Or is it emotion deliberately turned away from, emotion denied—in effect, emotion erased?"

He paused. Aurora's face betrayed interest, but nothing else. She had detached herself from the story.

"Emily, what are those feelings you said you suspected the protagonist was trying to suppress?"

"Mmm . . . resentment. Or regret. She seems deprived somehow."

"Yes, Dino?"

"Seems more like anger to me. Repressed anger."

"Towards whom?"

"The husband, of course. But also her situation in general. She's trapped—that's obvious, isn't it?"

"Sara?"

"I don't think it's anger. But I'm not sure what it is."

Malay glanced at Aurora. She was writing something down in a leather-bound notebook.

The first time he had met this graduate class—Fiction Workshop I—he had noticed that notebook. He had noticed *her*. She did not look like she belonged in his classroom. She did not look like she belonged on campus at all. The clothes, the hair, that leather-bound notebook. She was different. He read out her name from the class

card she had filled out: Aurora Jimenez-Rubio. Shit, he thought, a Makati socialite matron going slumming.

The other members of the class were much younger, just a few years out of the undergraduate programs. Sara Dy had a degree in Art Studies. Emily Verano was a business school graduate and had done a little time in advertising. Dino Peralta was a junior colleague of Malay's. Alex Masangkay taught at the Jesuit university.

It was not a bad class. Promising, except maybe for Alex. Malay liked them. They reminded him of his younger self. But there had been no Creative Writing courses then, certainly no Creative Writing degree. Malay and his friends had majored in English, in Philosophy, in Journalism. He sometimes wondered if more of them would have *stayed* writers if they had all majored in Creative Writing. Not likely. It was a question of economics.

There were more writers now because it was now possible to earn a decent living by writing. There were more publishers, more literary contests, more people wanting their biographies written and their speeches edited, more newspapers and magazines publishing book reviews. One could write for the movies and for television. And there were more opportunities for polishing one's craft—writing workshops, writers' organizations, writers' conferences . . . yes, courses in Creative Writing too. Writers kept in touch across generations, across regions. It was possible now to speak of a "writing community".

But one could hardly see Aurora Jimenez-Rubio as part of this scene.

Malay studied her covertly, as Dino launched into a little speech about the feasibility of understatement as a technique in postcolonial fiction.

She was wearing white linen. Small gold buckles on her black pumps. A strand of pearls around her throat, half hidden by her suit collar. Very classic. And very classy.

She was listening closely to Dino.

"What do you think, Aurora?"

She shifted her eyes to Malay's face. "I'm not sure I understand the exact meaning of 'postcolonial,'" she said in her low, slightly husky voice. "But I think Dino's point is that the reality in countries like ours—the reality which is the material for our literature—is not suited to, or cannot be adequately expressed, in an understated manner."

She raised her voice slightly at the end, transforming her statement into a question.

Malay was struck again by her diffidence. It seemed so out of synch with the rest of her—the cool elegance, the unmistakable mark of privilege.

"And do you agree?"

"Apparently not, since I chose to express myself in just such a fashion."

The others laughed, responding to her small, wry smile.

"It's a very well-written story, Aurora!" Sara exclaimed.

"I quite agree," Malay said. "Which is why I feel it is a pity that it does not permit itself to explore what it really wants to."

"But why are we assuming that it wants to do something else?" Emily cried.

"Should we conclude, then, that all it wants to be is a technical exercise?"

Malay saw Aurora Rubio wince, and felt a swift pang of regret. He had not meant to expose her, to expose the fragility of her detachment.

"Mind you," he said, "I'm not saying that's all the story is. What I'm saying is that it could be so much more."

Not good enough, he thought ruefully. If she was keeping count—maybe in that notebook of hers—that would be another black mark next to his name. Another unnecessary cruelty.

But was he not equally brutal with the others? Once, he had almost reduced Sara to tears. Another time, he had almost goaded Dino into a tantrum. But with them, there was never the intention to hurt. Therefore it was not cruelty.

Had he just admitted to himself that he wanted to hurt Aurora Rubio? But why should he want to?

Over lunch after that first class, Delfin Malay had spoken of her to his friend, Monico Ventura, "... a rich, bored housewife looking for something more exciting than shopping or mahjong. You never know what types these writing classes will attract."

"I hear she's nice," Monico said. "She's in Lydia's seminar on feminist fiction. She told Lydia that going back to school is part of her midlife crisis."

"Midlife? Why, how old is she?"

Monico shrugged. "How old is one supposed to be? Forty? Fifty?"

"She couldn't be fifty. She doesn't even look forty!"

"Why don't you ask her then? She's in *your* class, brad."

Aurora Rubio was forty-three, eight years older than Delfin Malay.

He held classes in his office, and she always sat in the same chair—the one farthest away from his desk, close to the bookcase—her long, stockinged legs crossed, her bag resting on the floor beside her foot.

She did not take a very active part in the discussions, speaking only when invited to, but listening very attentively, and making quick notes in the notebook propped on her chair's arm.

By the end of the second session, Malay had already discovered she was not slumming. She was serious about getting her M.A. And she was serious about writing. Later, he was to learn she was not a socialite either. She ran a company that exported leather goods and ceramics.

It disturbed him that his first impression of her had been so far off the mark.

Much later, when he knew her better, he told her of this initial impression. And she said, "I know. It was written all over your face. I thought you were going to drive me out of your room in disgust."

That was after she had gone drinking with him and his friends.

They had run into her in the parking lot one afternoon—Monico, Lydia and himself.

She had inquired if they were all done for the day.

"All done," Malay said. "We're off to our favorite watering hole."

"Is it near here?" she asked curiously.

"It's right here actually," Lydia said. "Would you like to join us, Aurora?"

To Malay's surprise, she said she would. "Are you driving there? Let me just tell my driver to follow us."

"Oh, man," Monico said, as Aurora walked quickly to the waiting Mercedes 230E. He and Lydia climbed into the back seat of Malay's Volkswagen beetle, leaving the seat beside Malay to Aurora.

Some of the other fellows were already deep in discussion at their usual table in the hostel terrace. Malay introduced them to Aurora, pulled up a chair for her, ordered her a beer.

"A far cry from champagne, huh?" he said, as she took her first sip, drinking it from the bottle like the rest of them.

"I don't like champagne," she said.

"Have some peanuts," he said, offering her the chipped dish.

She looked as out of place here as in his office, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

"I didn't think you could get alcohol on campus," she said.

"This is the only place which is allowed to serve it."

A breeze blew a strand of hair across her cheek, as she gazed out at the acacia trees, and, pushing it back absently, she said, "I can see why you like it here."

Shortly after that, Malay had taken up Alex's story in class. A rather banal one about young love thwarted. Obviously the product of genuine sentiment, but oh, so unimaginatively rendered. No, the poor young man did not have it.

Malay mulled over the possible ways of telling him so, and decided there was no kind way. I shall be a bit abstruse, he thought. Better that he be puzzled than devastated.

He quoted Rilke:

Young man, it is not when with first love seething
A voice mounts passionately to the closed mouth. Learn
to forget you sang. It was of no avail.
True song demands a different kind of breathing.
A calm. A shudder in the god. A gale.

After he had finished, he noted both Alex's look of bewilderment, and Aurora's quick sympathetic glance. *She* had understood.

One time, she asked Malay when he did his writing. The class was over, and they were relaxing over coffee and doughnuts. Aurora often picked something up on her way to the university so they could have merienda. The class had come to expect it. The rest took turns buying soft drinks. This time, Malay had offered them coffee, brewed in the department office and served in mismatched cups.

"Whenever I can," he said, in answer to Aurora's question.

"You don't wait for inspiration then? I thought that was the way it was with writers."

He checked to see if she was baiting him. She looked genuinely curious, and a bit shy, as though she feared being impertinent.

"I can't afford the luxury of waiting around," he said. "Writing's a job like any other." It wasn't quite true. His job was teaching, and the occasional hack writing. The real writing—the writing that went into his two short story collections and his unfinished novel—that was different.

Aurora looked pensive. "I always thought writing was more like . . . like playing the violin or . . . climbing a mountain."

"Is that why you're doing it?" he asked, smiling at her. "You want to climb a mountain?"

She flushed faintly. "I guess I . . . want to see if I can."

To Monico, he later said, "She's trying to escape from something. From some trap. The monotony of her life maybe."

"Given the instability of business conditions in this country, it can't be too monotonous running a big export firm," Monico said. "And the husband is into construction and plastics and steel, according to Lydia. Big time stuff." He shook his head. "No, like old F.S. Fitzgerald, you and I know nothing about the very rich, brad."

Malay had once spoken to his class about sublimity: "Nobility of thought, vehemence of emotion, and exalted language—these, we were told by the ancients, constitute the sublime. Not a bad standard to measure one's work against."

After that session during which he had discussed Aurora Rubio's story, he found himself returning often to one phrase, waxing eloquent on the theme: vehemence of emotion. This, he told his students, was what mattered most.

"What happened to 'recollected in tranquility,' sir?" Dino asked.

"Oh, tranquility certainly. But afterwards. First the emotion. You must surrender to it, sink into it, allow it to drown you, to overpower you. You will come through. And then you will recall it in tranquility. You will find the words, and the words will follow your bidding."

He noticed the expression in Aurora's eyes. "You don't agree, Aurora?"

"I was just thinking that . . . there aren't very many things in life that require so 'vehement' a response . . . particularly after one has lived long enough to realize the . . . futility of such vehemence." Her glance around the room was vaguely apologetic, suggesting her recognition of the probability that they would not share her view, none of them having lived as long as she. Not even Delfin Malay.

"Then one must write only about those things which one still feels vehemently about, against one's better judgement."

"Always?" Her eyes probed his.

"Certainly." He held the gaze. "Otherwise, why write at all?"

"Well, as a technical exercise, for instance," she said lightly.

He reread her story before returning it. It was so obvious what her carefully chosen words had tried to conceal. Not anger or resentment or regret. Pain. Denied, disguised, it throbbed nonetheless. Pain. He had not wanted to say it himself. The others would see it, he thought. Let them say it. But it had escaped them. They were too young.

Who had hurt her?

"Take it easy," Monico said. "You might convince yourself that it's your duty to save her."

"Save her from what?" he asked irritably.

"Precisely."

On the margins of her first page, he wrote: *Release it. Confront it. Let your story live.*

After he had returned all their manuscripts, Malay announced to the class that he was giving them two weeks off to finish their final drafts.

The next day, Aurora Rubio came to see him in his office.

"Am I . . . disturbing you, Professor?" she asked, holding the door open with one slender hand.

He dismissed the suggestion with a small gesture and offered her a chair—not the usual one, but the one beside his desk.

She was wearing a pale blue, long-sleeved blouse and a slim, dark skirt. It was the first time she had been in his office alone, and there was something about her manner which made the visit seem almost like a social call. He was suddenly aware of the messy state of his room.

"What can I do for you, Aurora?" he asked awkwardly.

"I have invited my classmates to spend the weekend in my summer house. It's by the beach. I thought it would be nice for everyone to relax a bit, before we shut ourselves up with our computers. And I was hoping that you might want to join us."

The unexpectedness of this invitation kept Malay silent for a few seconds. It occurred to him that he did not know anyone else who owned a summer house by the beach. Did Aurora Rubio really want him to come, or was she just being polite?

"Your wife is welcome too, of course," Aurora added.

"My wife?" he repeated. "Oh, I'm not married . . . that is, not anymore."

"I see. Will you allow me to invite some of your colleagues then, sir? I'm afraid you might be bored with only your students for company."

"Aurora, I've said this before. Why don't you drop the 'sir' and the 'professor'? They're not necessary."

She shook her head. "I'm old fashioned," she said, but her smile softened the refusal.

"All right, I'll come," Malay said. "Thanks very much for the invitation. If you really want to invite a couple of other people, I'm sure Monico and Lydia would love to come too."

When he asked for directions to her beach house, Aurora told him not to bother; everything would be taken care of.

They drove up in an air-conditioned coaster which Aurora said belonged to her husband's construction company. There was a cooler filled with bottles of beer and coke, a box of small *ensaymada*, a picnic basket stuffed with junk food. Alex had brought a guitar. Everyone was in high spirits.

Lydia asked Aurora Rubio if she came up often.

"Hardly ever," she said. She was wearing a loose denim shirt, white shorts, and dark glasses, and she had tied her hair back with a strip of black satin. Malay thought she looked no older than Emily or Sara. "We're too busy, my husband and I. It's a pity, actually. The place is quite nice."

"Quite nice" turned out to be a fine example of the art of understatement. The house stood on a small cove, raised a bit above the beach. A spacious, sprawling bungalow set in a graceful garden, all its rooms opening into a tiled terrace, which faced the perfect blue oval of the pool, and beyond it, the picturebook sea. A bowl of fruits and platters of different kinds of native *kakanin* had been arranged invitingly on a glass-topped table, around a tall vase filled with white chrysanthemums and orange daisies.

As they were settling themselves around the table, they were distracted by the sound of an approaching speedboat. Craning their necks, they saw a man on water skis gliding to a smooth landing directly in front of Aurora Rubio's house. He stepped out of his skis, slipped out of his life vest and dropped it on the sand beside the skis. He was very tall and lean and tanned.

As they watched, a glass door slid open, and Aurora stepped out into the terrace. "Oh, there he is," she said.

"Do you know that man, Aurora?" Emily asked.

"That's Greg, my husband," Aurora said.

At that moment, the man saw her and waved.

Lunch—an assortment of grilled meats and sea food, steaming rice, a salad of green mango slices, tomatoes, and onions with *bagoong*—was served in the pavilion beside the house, under the *camachile* trees.

"No, I can't stay till Sunday," Greg Rubio said. He had changed into a white t-shirt and grey slacks. "There's this important meeting I have to be at. I just wanted to touch base with all of you." He looked across the table at his wife. "I'm driving back early tomorrow morning."

"Won't that be rather tiring?" Lydia said.

"For Armando—that's my driver—I'm afraid so. Me, I intend to sleep all the way to Manila." He grinned at her.

From the way she grinned back, Malay could tell that she found him attractive. So did Emily and Sara.

In fact, he was a charming man—low-key, straightforward, easy in his skin, and with that suggestion of power which was a great part of his attractiveness.

"But you, of course, can't stand him," Monico said drily, as he and Malay strolled down the beach.

"Shit. He's okay."

"Yeah, right."

"She didn't tell us he was coming."

"Maybe he decided to surprise her. Or maybe he's checking out the competition."

"You wish."

"No, brad," Monico snorted. "*You wish.*"

Greg and Aurora Rubio were obviously used to entertaining. They did it effortlessly, smoothly. The house's many amenities, and its efficient, cheerful servants, were put at the guests' disposal. The little group took dips in the pool, went for rides in the speedboat, tossed a few baskets, tried out the billiard table and the ping pong table. Then, they stretched out on the lounging chairs, sipping cold drinks or eating *ginataan* and chatting with their host and hostess.

"If this is a trap," Monico said to Malay, "I'm all for bondage."

But Malay had noticed something. A hint of tension, belied by the Rubios' courtesies towards each other. Or maybe it was more of an absence . . . Something was missing...

It seemed to him that Greg Rubio glanced a little too often at his wife, as though checking for something. Once, he lifted an arm to emphasize a point, then brought it down lightly around her shoulders. She let it rest there a few seconds before moving quietly away. It seemed unimportant—she had probably remembered something she needed to take care of. But Malay thought he sensed withdrawal, rejection. Or had he imagined it?

The next day, Greg Rubio was gone.

Watching Aurora as she refereed a lively game of table tennis, gave instructions for lunch, emerged laughing from a quick dip in a sleek black and white swimsuit, around which she swiftly wrapped a brightly colored sarong, Malay wondered if he was also imagining that she seemed gayer, brighter, younger . . .

The one thing the house lacked, he decided, was a reading corner. After sundown, there was no spot where the light was good enough to read by.

He was about to try the floor lamp beside the living room couch, when Aurora spoke behind him, having apparently read his mind. "I've been meaning to put in a good reading lamp, but have never gotten around to it. My excuse is that we don't spend enough time in this house. But the truth is, no one really feels the lack."

Malay shrugged. "Who wants to play the nerd at the beach?"

"I do have one good painting here though." She touched a switch, and one wall sprung to life.

Malay moved closer, recognizing the painting from having seen a picture of it somewhere.

Three women—barefooted, brown-skinned, slant-eyed, dark-haired—in a blue and gold and scarlet grove. One woman, in a purple skirt, sat on a rock, holding a golden guitar with one hand, and cupping an ear with the other. Another one, in a blue skirt, stood beside her, her body bent slightly forward, gazing out, with a hand over her eyes shielding them from the sunlight. A third, in a garnet-colored skirt, stood beside her, calling out to someone or something, one hand to the side of her mouth. All around them were butterflies, and flowers like butterflies . . . white and purple flowers, drifting in the air, drifting over the women's thin white blouses. And birds . . . blue and pink and gold, flying over the women's heads, around their knees. Chasing after the birds, a yellow butterfly and a purple dragonfly. And on the ground a pineapple, a watermelon slice, a tangerine . . .

Malay rubbed his chin, bemused. It was a strange, beguiling scene . . .

"I know this painting," he said.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Are they having a picnic, you think? Or a romp in the forest? Or are they running away?"

"This is their secret garden," she said softly. "They come here to get away, to live their secret lives."

"To climb the mountain," he said, lowering his own voice, and turning to look at her.

"Perhaps," she acknowledged, meeting his eyes briefly.

That night they made a bonfire on the beach, roasted half a basket of corn on the cob, finished a case of beer, and sang old Beatles songs. ("Surprise!" Sara cried. "Yes, we know the Beatles!") Aurora

laughed at Alex's corny jokes, stretched out on a mat beside Lydia, and saw a shooting star. Malay saw it too, and made a wish on it. A foolish wish.

Later, Monico and Dino fell asleep on the sand. Sara and Emily decided to go for a stroll, and Alex announced he would accompany them to protect them from lurking fiends.

Malay looked at Aurora and asked her if she wanted to go along. For a while, it seemed that she would. But she changed her mind. "I'm a bit tired," she said. "I think I'll go back inside. Good night, all."

He sat on the beach by himself for a long time, listening to the sound of the sea.

On the day that his students were supposed to submit their final drafts, Delfin Malay waited in his office until five-thirty.

Emily arrived first. Then Alex. At around noon, Dino dropped in to tell Malay he had been unable to finish his revisions and would take an Incomplete. Sara dropped off her manuscript in the afternoon.

On his way out, Malay decided to stop by the department office. In his pigeonhole was a Manila envelope. One of the clerks told him that it had been delivered sometime in the afternoon.

Malay returned to his office to read the story. A vein had started throbbing in his right temple. Had she climbed the mountain? Had she allowed her story to live?

His eyes scanned the first page, and the second, and the third . . . Then he put the manuscript down on his desk. For a few minutes, he sat very still, astonished by the sharpness of his disappointment. Then he picked the pages up again, and read the story through to the end.

Aurora Jimenez-Rubio had sent him an entirely new story. It was about a little girl and her pet, a magical talking cat. It was beautifully, delicately written. But it had nothing to do with her. It was a fairy tale.

She had written him a fairy tale.