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Bad Thing

MARIANNE VILLANUEVA

FOR WEEKS, she had expected something to happen. She'd be driving along when suddenly she'd feel sick, as though she anticipated hitting a car or a road barrier. She could see the collision in her mind, almost hear the thud of something hitting her bumper.

She would be driving her six-year-old to school, and this feeling would make her slow down and look furtively right and left, right and left. When they arrived at the school without mishap, she would be surprised and thankful. Though she didn't know who she should be thankful to. She wasn't the praying sort. Still, she'd ease her unsteady legs out of the car, and call to her son with some measure of confidence, and push herself through the rest of the day. Like that.

And then, on the 17th of November, after months and months of her expecting something to happen, the man on a bicycle crashed into the front passenger side of her shiny red Corolla, and scraped both his forearms. Her son was not with her this time, thankfully. She was in unfamiliar surroundings, in Berkeley, where everything was a lot dirtier than down where she worked, at Stanford; where paper wrappers blew around in the street; where the students sat on the sidewalks on Telegraph Avenue as though completely unconcerned about germs and hygiene; where people bumped into her as she wandered on the sidewalk asking directions, causing her to remember her purse. So.

She heard the thud before she turned and saw him. When she turned, she saw a man's face, grimacing, pressed against the window. She was out of the car immediately, and grabbed the handlebars of his bike. Are you all right? All right? I'm so sorry. How stupid! She'd never even seen him. He'd been biking on the sidewalk.

She'd been aiming for the entrance of a parking garage, but had been momentarily distracted by a sign that said: Sorry, Lot is Temporarily Full. And, staring at this sign in disbelief—disbelief because it was still so early in the morning—she'd found herself asking: What sort of crazy place is this?

Earlier, she thought she'd found a parking place, in a two-level garage on another street. But, just to be sure, because nothing about this place made her feel sure, she asked a couple of students if you had to pay to park there, and they said yes, and when she asked where, they said you had to get a little ticket from a metal dispenser up by the entrance. And walking to the entrance, she suddenly saw a big sign that she'd not seen earlier. It said: This Lot is Reserved Parking for Students Only, M-F, 7 AM-5 PM. And it was 10 AM, so she could not park there. Thank goodness she had thought to ask the students! The sign warned that "Violators will be Towed Away". And she didn't want that to happen, not in her current fragile state anyway, not with her feeling as though any unexpected occurrence would find her chipping and cracking, like the paint on an old wooden doll.

So. She was standing on the sidewalk, all five foot two inches of her, and the young man, who was very tall, who was at least six feet, and who had the pale, pinched look of an ascetic, was still bent over, inhaling deeply, though he refused all her offers: Shall I take you to a clinic? No? But your arm, look at your arm. Just in the few short moments they'd been standing there, she could already discern black and blue around the edges of the scrape, a telltale swelling. And another spot, on his hand, that was red and raw. She felt terrible!

She grasped the handlebars. Let me fix your bike. Let me take you to work. We can put the bike in the trunk of my car, and I'll drive you. But the young man, whose name, she found out later, was Henrik, said simply: "Just watch out for bikers next time, OK?" Yes, yes, oh yes! But how could she tell him—I've known this would happen for months, but I didn't know when or how. And then, another thought: what if she were to go forward now, forgetting about that old feeling, thinking the bad thing she felt sure was about to happen had happened, and suddenly, something even worse, the real Bad Thing, came along?

It was like that with what happened to her sister. All the years they were growing up, and even until the time they were married and having children, and had both moved to the States, her sister was the Bad Thing. Anything her sister did made her ill. Her sister

got a promotion at work. Oh, how happy it made her mother to tell her. Her sister's husband got a million dollar bonus for Christmas. Her mother told all the relatives.

But she, Teresa, would lock herself in the garage, smoking furiously. After a while, people noticed. Where is Teresa? What is she doing in the garage? Come out of there! What do you think you are doing—?

Maybe some of this feeling finally communicated itself to her sister, because in the last year, she had not called. No, not even to let her know that she was pregnant with her third child. Teresa found out from her mother, a month before her sister was due.

And then, six months after the baby was born, six months after Christopher, her sister died. Streptococcal pneumonia was the cause, though the autopsy report stated "sepsis." She had caught the flu, and it just dragged on and on, and like any typical thirty-year-old woman, her sister continued to go to work, in the big bank in Manhattan, and she had continued to go out for dinner with her husband and his friends, doubtless coughing all the while. And then, a few days later, she died. Just like that. No one could explain it.

And she thought her sister was the Bad Thing! Her sister's death was even worse! Now she saw her sister everywhere! It was like the old woman had said—the clairvoyant, who lived in a nipa hut behind her aunt's house in Bacolod.

"You have a twin," the old woman said. "But she is of the spirit world. You and she look alike, and she follows you wherever you go. Turn your head quickly and you might see her, at the corner of your eye."

The old woman had given her an ointment for rubbing on her belly. For facilitating—what? She'd wanted another child after her son, but she and her husband just hadn't been able to manage it. Funny, she'd taken the ointment with her to the hospital in New York, those last few days before her sister passed away. What could she have been thinking? Was she going to rub it on her sister's belly—her sister, who, by the time of her death, already had three children? Stupid woman, she berated herself—you've gone daft, finally. She hid the ointment in her bag and told no one. Though later, looking at her sister in the hospital bed, looking at how bloated she'd become, she was tempted to lift the edge of her sister's hospital gown and rub the ointment on her stomach. Just in case. Just to try anything. Because nothing the doctors did seemed to help—not the antibiotics, not the hydrocortisone, not the ventilator, not the Pavulon,

so perhaps this? This ointment from an old woman in Bacolod, from the other side of the world.

Hadn't the old woman decorated her one-room nipa hut with images of the Santo Niño and the Sacred Heart of Jesus? All those bleeding crucifixes and stigmata and curly-headed white saints. The bottle was filled with a sweet-smelling clear liquid and stalks of what looked like, must be, seaweed, and something else—a long sliver of hard white bone that she'd once crazily imagined had come from someone's finger. Hadn't the old woman breathed three times on the vial and clenched Teresa's hands tightly between her own and said the ointment was good, good, good?

She did not give the ointment to her sister. Perhaps that was why, later in the week, her sister died. Her sister died, and not even with anyone around her that she knew. She passed away in the elevator, while they were bringing her up to the operating room for a tracheotomy. Teresa could imagine the scene in the elevator—the panic, the pandemonium. Could they get a heart machine in there? Were they giving her EKG shocks right in there? Later, when they were all at the hospital, her sister was already in a winding sheet, her hands—poor hands! Still with the mauve nail polish—already tied together. The sight of the tied hands made Teresa unaccountably angry. The bruises on her dead sister's wrists and ankles were reminders of the times they had to strap her down to the bed because she was thrashing around, like a drowning person. Oxygen starvation was what they called it. And the terror of drowning and of being tied down—! Tears would come to Teresa's eyes at the thought.

So this Bad Thing, her sister, was not really the Bad Thing she had thought it was. The real Bad Thing was the hospital, the indifferent nurses and doctors, the endless probing of her sister's helpless body, and, finally, the lonely death in an elevator. She would never forget that lesson.

She couldn't get the man out of her mind. Henrik. She saw him approaching the car, and suddenly her angle of perception would shift and she *was* him, riding blithely along on a fine red bike, on a fine morning that was warmer than you'd expect in November, and she suddenly saw herself in her red Corolla, flashing out of nowhere, and she knew without a doubt that the whole thing was her fault. Never mind what she told her husband later: that the man was obviously biking too fast, that he wasn't looking or he would have seen her, that he should have stopped before crossing the entrance to a parking garage, etc. etc.

Now her shiny red car, which was only two years old, had a dent on the front passenger side, and scraped paint. But what of Henrik? She'd given him her number, and extracted from him a promise that he would call to let her know how he was doing, but that night, though the phone rang and rang, it was always someone else. It was funny, they almost never got any calls, and suddenly last night there was a call from Mike Villacruz way down in Los Angeles, whom they hadn't heard from in almost eight months, telling them how his father had a stroke after breaking the bank at Marapara; and then there was a call from her *Tita* Tessie, up in Daly City, telling them how out of the blue she'd gotten a call from *Manang* Jopay, who apparently had left her husband in the Philippines and come to the States on her own, and now needed a place to stay; and then a call from Dick, a friend of her husband's, talking about how his wife, who was six months pregnant with triplets, had suddenly contracted chicken pox. But no Henrik. Henrik had disappeared. Maybe he'd lost the scrap of paper on which she'd written her number. Maybe he'd taken it out of his jeans pocket later and found he couldn't read it—God knows her hand had been shaky as she'd begun writing her name. She'd written her name on a slip of lined paper torn off a page from a notebook—and even that was strange, because usually she carried a card with her, but that morning she couldn't find it, not anywhere in her handbag. It seemed to have disappeared into thin air. She'd written her name, Teresa Lardizabal, and writing it had felt her guilt weigh so palpably on her shoulders that she felt faint, almost as if she could sink to the ground and ask him, Henrik, to deliver her to the nearest clinic. Then her number. And, oh god, should she give her office number, in case this guy turned out to be a crank, one of those loony ones with friends who'd tell him to "sue the bitch for all she's worth"! She was glad her car was dirty—maybe Henrik would think she was just a student. She was glad she had found no card to give him, only a slip of torn paper. But she was sorry, too, about his forearms, and about the nasty shock she had given him. Would she ever be able to set foot in Berkeley again?

Sometimes she'd have crazy conversations with Henrik in her head. Why didn't you stop, she berated him, over and over. What if something really bad had happened and you got a concussion? Then your wife—or girlfriend, whatever the case may be—would be crying her eyes out right now!

So. For months, she realized, she had expected it to happen. Like the shedding of old clothes. The breaking apart of some outer skin.

She'd be standing there on the sidewalk, her two feet in their scuffed, sensible black loafers planted firmly on the ground. She'd be standing there, like some acolyte waiting to be admitted to the feast. Why was she not more prepared? Why was her hair in a mess, flying about her shoulders? Why did she allow her belly, her breasts to sag? Why did her shoulders stoop, why did her eyes dart uneasily from side to side instead of staring straight ahead boldly, confidently?

Other people walked the ground without even paying attention to what they stepped on. It continued to hold them up. No problem. She walked gingerly, as though the earth had a skin one must be careful not to break through. As though there might be something underneath. And everything was fragile. The cup she held in her hand in the kitchen that morning found itself inexplicably on the white tiled floor, shattered into dozens of pieces. Her son, whom she loved and held close at every opportunity, told her stories of things that happened to him at school, stories that tugged at her heart and made her alternately angry, bitter, and sad. Her husband's body, too, seemed to be melting, losing form and definition, assuming a different shape entirely from the one she had grown used to. One evening she watched him working at his computer. He was thin, but his stomach hung loosely over his belt. Why was that? And his face had numerous tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Noticing this, she would run to the mirror in the bathroom and minutely examine her own face, wondering, wondering.

She made an appointment with the Help Center at her workplace. If she thought the ground was in danger of cracking, she might as well talk to someone about it.

She didn't tell her husband. Once, during a fight, she called his mother in the Philippines, to make him stop shouting. Ever since then, he called her "*sira-ulo*"—broken-head. She didn't want to give him any more opportunities. She might one day do the inconceivable and run away with her son. She imagined her husband might hire a lawyer. He would then mention that his wife, the broken-head, had once made an appointment to see a "counselor", which she believed was what those people in the Help Center were called.

She didn't know why it didn't make much difference to her that her husband called her such things. When she was growing up, her father often referred to her mother as Idiot Number 1. Her sister was Idiot Number 2, and she was Idiot Number 3. Back home, everyone thought this was wildly funny. Now, she imagined confiding to one of her American friends about this childhood experience. She could

imagine the reaction: Pig! Perhaps the word "chauvinist" might precede it. But there you had it.

She made the appointment soon after the accident with the bicyclist. The appointment was with a Dr. Mary Chang. Dec. 3, 1:00 P.M. December! She hadn't known it would be that far away, and by then she'd be thinking of Christmas and who knows whether or not she might actually have been swallowed up by the earth by then. They'd find a few strings of her long black hair in the shower stall, and that would be it.

But she found she couldn't wait that long, and one day she cracked open the yellow pages of the phone book and called various toll-free numbers. At each one, the counselor would begin: Hi! (in that sincere, falsely bright American way) My name is——! What's your name? And she would hang up.

Finally, there was one number. A place called the Bridge. A young man answered and didn't ask for her name. He sounded so young. She became suspicious and asked him, "Are you a student?" He admitted he was, and she almost laughed out loud. She, a 31-year-old woman, confiding to this *child*!

Mostly he listened to what she had to say, interspersing her narrative with a non-committal "Ummm, ummm", and there were long stretches when he said nothing at all. After a while, she began to feel strange, as though the voice on the other end of the line was detaching itself slowly from the telephone. Thank you very much, she said abruptly, and hung up. She wondered if he'd been about to say "Ummm."

So she did nothing. And very soon Christmas was almost upon her, and the news that her brother-in-law, a small secretive man who had lived in New York the last five years, would be arriving in San Francisco on the Saturday, and wondered whether he might stay with them? Her husband grumbled—lazy, good-for-nothing was what he called his brother. All they knew about him was: he worked as a "marketing analyst" for some unnamed company, and he'd told them he owned a vacation home in the Poconos, though none of their other relatives on the East Coast had actually been invited there and doubted whether it actually existed. He rented a room from a Filipino family in Jersey City, and sometimes when Teresa called she heard the sound of clanging pots and pans and the hiss of something frying on a stove. She heard an old lady's voice shout her brother-in-law's name, and he would come to the phone out-of-breath, saying he'd been out back, barbecuing.

But. Still. She remembered the dark figure in the overcoat who came to the hospital when she was in New York during her sister's dying. He'd come up the elevator to the intensive care ward, where she was sitting in rumpled clothes on a plastic-covered sofa, and later took her down to the hospital cafeteria where he bought her a hot dog and cocoa. She'd found herself staring with new interest at his face, which did not remind her at all of her husband's. The face that was now in front of her, partially obscured by lazy smoke from his cigarette, was soft all over and in some places pock-marked, and the hair was light brown and thinning at the forehead. They had sat across from one another at a vinyl-top table on some avocado green plastic chairs. Only moments earlier, in the intensive care ward, it had seemed to her that exhaustion would suck her down, down, right through the linoleum-tiled floor of the waiting lounge. But now she was here, in the cafeteria, her brother-in-law a solid presence, a dark figure in a heavy overcoat who sat silently nodding his head. He did not disappear—in fact, refused to be distressed by her tears. After a while, she began feeling better. As though the hot dog which had sunk like a stone to the pit of her stomach were the only cure she had ever needed. She'd stood up then, made a joke, and later observed how the snowflakes fell on the shoulders of his dark coat as he turned away, towards Lexington Avenue.

Later, back in California, she'd forgotten about him. Doubtless her husband called to let him know the news, but Teresa did not care. She lay all day on the bed, a pillow hugged to her stomach. Those days her mouth was stopped up with something vile and bitter that made it impossible for her to talk or even to cry. One day she thought she, too, might be dying, and dragged herself to the car. It was four in the morning. Her husband and son were still asleep. She drove herself the four miles to the nearest hospital, and by the time she reached the emergency room she was shaking uncontrollably.

"Tell me—is it pneumonia?" she whispered to the young doctor on duty. He'd laughed, then. "No, just the flu," he said. He gave her two Tylenol tablets and sent her home.

But she is alive! She does not know exactly how or when the mood of sadness slips from her. She only knows that now she refuses to be sucked under the ground and no longer fears to crack the surfaces of whatever it is she is walking on.

The earth begins to assume solidity. She presses gingerly with her toes on the damp ground. Because of the winter rains the ground is muddy and the mud cakes her boots. She happily tramps around in

this mud, as though remembering once again what it was like to be six or seven years old. She grasps her son's hand firmly as they walk to the park. Sometimes, very occasionally, she will even sing. An old song from long ago.

"*Leron, Leron sinta*—"she will sing. She does not know where she finds the words. Or, at other times, "*Bahay kubo, kahit munti*—" Silly words, really. When her son asks what they mean, she can say only that they are songs she can remember clapping her hands to, in an old house covered with vines in Manila.

The next week, she is rear-ended while crossing an intersection along El Camino Real. The hit is hard—so hard she hits the car in front of her, which in turn hits the car in front of it. But when she gets out of the car to take a look, knees shaking, she sees only that the rear bumper is a little askew. Barely scratched, even. While the lady behind her, in the shiny maroon sedan, has a tented hood and a smashed left light. "It's a brand new car, too," the lady says mournfully. And Teresa wants to put her arm around her and hug her. But she does not. Instead, when the young policeman asks her if she wants to make a report, she shakes her head. Her heart is still beating painfully in her chest, but she forces herself back into her car, and pulls away from the curb without looking back.

Lenox Hill

MARIANNE VILLANUEVA

I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO SAY: I took the first plane to New York, but I did not. I am ashamed to say it, but I didn't at first believe my brother-in-law when he called and said she was very sick. I remember listening to his foreign, English voice, and a host of memories came over me—memories of other times, other crises and emergencies, times that left me feeling helpless and angry. And he sounded so matter-of-fact, so *English* and above it all, and when he said she had strep I thought: Now you are really pulling my leg—you say all these awful things are happening and she has STREP? I had wanted to hang up on him, but did not, and the rest of that day I busied myself with office work and did not think about my sister anymore.

When my sister and I first came to America, she chose to settle on the East Coast, I on the West. She was always more adventurous, more self-confident, tough. I wanted to be close to my mother's relatives, who lived in various San Francisco suburbs. Later, I came to regret my decision. My sister seemed so free there in that big city, and I was entrapped with family disputes and family obligations. My sister married an Englishman and had three children. She lived on Park Avenue and had two maids. She was very happy.

It was a Dr. Sterling who called the house, early on the morning of my sister's third day in the hospital. He said: Come as soon as you can, there's not much time.

An aunt drove me to the airport. I asked for a seat by the window and curled up with my legs tucked under me. Strong sunlight filled the airplane cabin. It was impossible to sleep. I looked down and saw clouds; a mountain; a river snaking through brown canyons.

Throughout the long flight I read passages from the book I happened to check out of the library the previous week: *The Four Winds: A Shaman's Journey Into the Amazon*. It was written by two men, Erik Jendresen and Antonio Villoldo, but it was really Villoldo's story, Villoldo's journey to the Amazon. In the early section of the book, I came across a passage about an autopsy: the corpse was that of a 37-year-old woman, and as he watches a medical student put a piece of her brain on a slide Villoldo asks himself, Where is the consciousness that was Jennifer, where were her memories, the unique trace that had made her who she was?

When I arrived in New York, it was late at night. Strange men held up signs near the baggage carousels, and I was frightened and tried to get away from them, but one of them spotted me and asked me if I needed a limousine. Yes! I said, But I will not ride alone with you. I must have seemed hysterical. He looked at me carefully and then said, Wait here, I will find someone to share the ride.

After what seemed like an interminable wait, he returned with a young student: a Korean visiting friends at Columbia. The Korean talked and talked, all the way into Manhattan. I think we passed a bridge and entered a tunnel. With startling suddenness we were in the middle of canyons of buildings. The driver dropped off the Korean and we began to talk. He was a young black man, with two children, and he told me he had been waiting at the airport for hours, and he was hungry and wanted to go home and have his dinner. He didn't charge me very much. I was sorry when I got out of the limousine.

This is the part where things become difficult. I have to switch to another way of writing about events, in order to get through the rest of what happens. I can describe things more accurately if I present, briefly, scenes that stand out in my mind, as of—

Memory 1: Arrival

I am at the apartment on Park Avenue. It must be after 10 at night. All the lights in the apartment are blazing, and my sister's three children, aged five, four, and one, are wide awake and my first impression upon walking in the door is of loud screams and an atmosphere of general hubbub and disorder. My brother-in-law walks up, holding the youngest upside down in his arms. It is the first time I have seen this fabled place, this place that all my sister's classmates in Manila know to visit when they are in New York. And now I note the mirrored hallway, the high-ceilinged kitchen with its capacious

island, the various suites of rooms. I ask for my mother and with barely a word my brother-in-law relieves me of my bag and directs me to the hospital. I go out into a night which is much warmer than I had come to expect. All up and down Park Avenue, an amazing sight: Christmas trees are blinking bravely in the darkness. I pass lighted doorways, behind which stand doormen with surly faces. I pass women in fur coats walking their dogs. I do not feel the cold.

Memory 2: Lenox Hill

I am at the intensive care ward. There, at the end of a long row of beds, I see a swollen shape, lying with legs awkwardly spreadeagled. Long, thick, black hair is spread out on a pillow. I instinctively head towards this head of black hair, and pass beds filled with old, old people, some with their hospital gowns pushed all the way up to their stomachs, revealing bone-thin limbs. Some with their mouths twisted open, as though gasping for air. I at first do not believe this swollen body I am approaching to be my sister's, but when I come close and see my mother there, my heart fills with grief, a grief so great I want to shout over and over: WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO YOU?

My mother looks up at me, and whatever I prepared myself to find when I arrived at the hospital, it certainly wasn't this: my mother looks at me, and her face is happy and peaceful. "Come," she says, sensing my fear, coaxing me forward. She is strength, strength itself, sitting there in the intensive care ward, while all my insides seem in danger of cracking open, and something snakes into my heart, cold.

I look into my sister's eyes: they are flaming red and twice their normal size. A thick, opaque film of fluid coats them and oozes out at the corners. Her swollen hand makes a faint movement toward the ventilator in her mouth.

This is what my sister has: three IVs, one in each arm to push drugs and fluids, an arterial line in her left arm to draw blood and for hooking up to a transducer for constant blood pressure readings; a nasogastric tube running through her nose and into her stomach, hooked up to a suction machine on the floor to drain her stomach constantly so that she won't aspirate, regurgitate into her trachea; an endotracheal tube down her throat; a ventilator because she can't breathe by herself. Whenever she moves her tongue the monitor emits a faint beep.

I grab her limp hand, knowing that now she cannot pull away, as she would have done were she not so seriously ill. I sob, because I realize this is something I had not been able to do for many years,

and it has to be now, now in these circumstances. I sob, too, because my sister, who I had always remembered as a rather vain person, who when she was 16 had had a nose job and an eye job and various other things done to make her look less Oriental, who was thirty-four and had three young children, was no more, and this new physical reality, this shape that allowed me to hold her hand without resistance, had taken her place.

Now there is a flurry of beeps from the ventilator. My mother bends forward and tells my sister not to talk. My mother tells her, "There will be plenty of time later." But my sister is still biting down, moving her tongue. Nurses hurry over. The beeps increase. I feel something terrible is happening, and whatever it is I feel I must be the cause. I step back from the bed while the nurses call out, "Paz, Paz, stop biting the ventilator. Stop it!" I cannot bear to hear my sister addressed in such a way, as though she were a five-year-old. She is helpless, she cannot move. If she were able to, she might flail away at one of these nurses, but now she can only lie there, her tongue perhaps the only part of her capable of movement.

I want to shout: "Can't you let her speak? Can't you get the ventilator out of her mouth?" Because I can see how it hurts her: that monstrous thing, pushing her swollen tongue to the inside of her cheek, pressing on her cracked lips. But I stand there, dumb. Already there are at least two other nurses there, hurrying, hurrying, preparing to inject my sister with a sedative. I do nothing. Instead I flee from them and head for the waiting lounge, cursing my cowardice.

Memory 3: The Waiting Lounge

It is a tiny room with two lumpy, plastic-covered sofas in a sick shade of avocado green, and a window that overlooks a side street and some brownstone buildings. Against one wall is a payphone, and newspapers are scattered on a coffee table. Later I will come to know every particular of this room: the squares of graying linoleum, the exact depressions on the sofa cushions, the coffee rings on the cheap wooden tables, the television suspended by a steel arm from the wall. I will cradle the phone receiver against my ear and make numerous, teary calls to California, to my husband. My mother and I will sit on the green sofa and wait for the doctor to tell us about my sister's latest blood gas readings, minute improvements in her lung capacity. We will sit here and pace and get to know the relatives of Mrs. Beatrice Sulkin—a son, a daughter, a husband—who pace with us. We will come to know all this.

Memory 4: Filipina Nurses

Two of them come to me as I sob on the sofa and one of them hands me a box of tissues. "*Calma lang*," she says. Her companion says, "Don't worry. She is much better now. She was very bad this morning."

Their words comfort me but I continue to sob, though I realize it is now more for myself than for my sister—sobbing because the long trip in the airplane, the leave-taking from my son and husband this Christmas, was so very hard, and because I am exhausted. "*Calma lang*."

A young Filipina named Lourdes is her nurse that first night. She is pretty, with thick black hair plaited and fastened up at the back of her head. She jokes with the young interns, and keeps injecting my sister with Benadryl. Lourdes tells me that my sister keeps fighting the ventilator. She tells me that earlier they had to strap her down to the bed. I had noticed the purplish marks on her wrists and ankles and wondered where they came from. Tuesday morning, two days earlier, was when they had almost lost her. It was the night my brother-in-law had gone home to spend some time with the children.

They said she was thrashing in the bed. Perhaps it wasn't fear so much as the feeling that she was drowning, her lungs filling up with fluid. But the thrashing was using up whatever little oxygen was going to her brain. And they had to strap her down.

Since my mother arrived, Thursday morning, she has been quiet. She looks at my mother, and she knows her. My mother strokes her hair tenderly. Tenderly she fans my sister's legs and pushes up the hospital gown because my sister needs air. She needs air more than anything in the world. Look at her fingers and toes, already turning blue . . .

Memory 5: Doctors

It may be the third or fourth day, and I am already feeling how ineffectual my presence is. I am standing by my sister's bed, but I don't—can't—speak. I stand, dumb with misery, by my sister's hospital bed.

The doctors have injected her with Pavulon, a paralyzing agent. They say they had to sedate her because anxiety increases the heart rate and uses up oxygen and they are worried she might suffer brain damage. They say she can still hear. I ask them, what is it like, this hearing? They tell me, like hearing voices in your sleep. Yet I hesitate to speak to my sister in the same loud voice the nurses use: Paz,

I'm going to put eyepatches on you now; Paz, I'm going to put drops in your eyes. I stand there, dumb with misery.

Memory 6: My Uncle

I am jealous of my mother's younger brother because he has managed to make my sister giggle. It is the last time we see her conscious and awake. He takes one of her swollen feet and starts to tickle it. My sister's shoulders rise and her swollen mouth parts and even with the ventilator in her mouth she does look strangely happy. I watch, dumb with misery.

Later, I try to tell her things. My voice is soft. I can think of nothing to say. Only things like, "Panggoy," using the name I much prefer to her Christian name, "I am here." Here! But what does that mean, exactly? Even my touch is light and tentative. I am unable to stroke her arms with my mother's vehemence, my brother-in-law's vigor. They seize the parts of her body as though claiming her, inciting her to struggle. But I am afraid.

Memory 7: Sunday Night

My mother and I are stretched out, one to a sofa, in the tiny waiting room. It feels as though we have just fallen asleep when someone comes in and switches on the light. My mother and I are up instantly. It is the young doctor, Dr. Rosen, wearing green scrubs. He gives us my sister's latest blood gas count. He is ecstatic. We are, too. We think now that my sister will surely live.

Memory 8: In the Kitchen

In this bright place, all white tile and chrome appliances, I sit on a high stool and tell my brother-in-law about my sister's latest blood gas reading. He is happy but trying hard not to lose control. I tease him that he should take my sister on a long cruise for their tenth anniversary, which is coming up in May. He tells me they have planned to go to Egypt.

Memory 9: Monday

I spend the whole day away from the hospital. I feel light-headed and happy. I walk down Fifth Avenue and marvel at the giant golden snowflakes strung across the street. When I finally check back at the hospital, it is late at night. My mother is at her customary place, but her head is bowed. Poor woman, I think. She must be exhausted. But when she looks up, the expression on her face frightens me and

I ask, what is it, what is it? The ventilator, she says. They tried to take her off it today, but she had a setback. A terrible setback. Her body just couldn't take it.

Memory 10: Doormen

I begin to look forward to the walks in the cold, and know buildings and doormen. I know all the doormen in my sister's building. One in particular, an old man named George, is very kind. He is the one who runs after me if I happen to get into the elevator without speaking to him and asks: "How is she?" My chin pressed down into my overcoat, I invariably shake my head and say, "Not good." George lifts his hands, shrugs his shoulders. "It's in God's hands," he says.

Memory 11: Other People

I sit on a sagging chair in the foyer. It is three, four in the morning. I sit and look out the window and wait for it to get light. In the room behind me, a doctor is shouting into a phone: Are you crazy? What do you think I am, stupid? Do you think I'm stupid? And she goes on and on like that, interminably.

There is someone else with a terrible cough. Choking on phlegm. It is an old man or an old woman. I want to cover my ears, to shout: Stop it! Stop it!

I am alone, waiting for my mother to come. Waiting for my brother-in-law. I am tired. Who are all these strangers yakking in the foyer?

Now and then I walk past the rows of sick old people, being careful to keep my eyes down. I see my sister lying there, her bloated shape, her eyes taped shut, no sign of life or movement. There is no one with her. The children's nanny, a Filipina who has left her two young boys with her mother so she can come to America and care for my sister's children, was supposed to have been there at 10. It is now almost 11. Not even my brother-in-law is there.

Memory 12: Tuesday

My sister has a bad night. In fact, we nearly lose her. My mother rushes to the apartment to get me. It is cold and raining. In her panic, she slips and hurts her knee. The wound has bled through her pants when she arrives at the apartment, but she immediately rushes back with me to the hospital without bothering to change. When we arrive at the hospital, I am annoyed to see that the nurse on duty, an

elderly Filipina, is wandering aimlessly around with a nonchalant air, as though nothing is happening. "She is all right now, she is stable," she keeps telling my distraught mother. Stable, but only for the moment, I think bitterly.

Memory 13: Mary Ellen

I do not recognize the nurse, though thank God it is not the other one of last night, the old Filipina who seemed only to want to sit down and smoke her cigarette in the waiting room and read the newspapers scattered on the floor.

Mary Ellen looks Irish. She has red hair, calm grey eyes, a wide mouth that seems always on the verge of saying something sarcastic. To all my queries of "How is she?" she has only one answer: "The same." But I like this nurse, with her warm, stolid, squarish body, and her clean smell. I think to myself: my sister will not die as long as *she* is there.

When her shift is over, I want to tell her: come back soon. I watch her leave the ward in her going-out clothes. She and another nurse, another Filipina, are heading for the elevators, and they look different, almost coquettish, in short skirts and sheer black stockings. I wander back alone to my sister's bed.

Memory 14: Wednesday

My sister is no longer the only young woman in the intensive care ward. Everyone seems to be gathered around the latest arrival: a woman who has been placed in Bed No. 1, closest to the nurses' station. I watch them wheel her in and, in my confused state, mistake her black hair for my sister's. I go to my sister's bedside, but I cannot sit down. Someone has taken away the chair.

Beside her someone has placed a small pocketbook: *Furrow*, the collected writings of Jose Maria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei. He is about to be beatified and Mrs. Yujuico who works in my office tells me the period just before his beatification is when prayers to him have the most potency. On the window sill my brother-in-law has propped up a picture of Georgina and William, sitting on Santa Claus' lap.

Memory 15: The Pay Phone

The pay phone in the waiting room rings annoyingly. Hello, a young woman says. Can I speak to Mrs. Greenfeld? There is no Mrs. Greenfeld here, I say. I hang up. Not five minutes later, it rings again.

I know there is a Mrs. Greenfeld there, with Mr. Weinberger. What am I? An answering service? I go to call someone. A young male intern comes to the phone. No, no, he says, and hangs up. Ten minutes later, the phone rings again. Please, says the young woman. I need to speak to my mother. I know she is there: a Mrs. Greenfeld who is with Mr. Weinberger. I go back to the ward. There, next to Bed No. 2, is a thirty-ish woman in a tweed overcoat and a slouchy hat. Are you Mrs. Greenfeld? I ask. Yes, she says. Mr. Weinberger looks very pale, and his mouth is twisted in a kind of grimace. You have a phone call, I say. She comes to the phone and I can hear rapid-fire Yiddish and I know that somewhere in there is some mention about me and the number of times I have hung up on the daughter saying, There is no Mrs. Greenfeld here.

I collect my things and go back to the apartment. There is no one in the study. I lie down on the leather couch. I look out and see it has begun to snow. The phone keeps ringing: someone called Donna Lopez from Washington, D.C.; Matt Skidmore, my sister's boss at Chemical Bank; Fletcher, a friend of my brother-in-law from Merrill Lynch.

I see Georgina and William playing outside in the hallway with the chocolate egg I had given them as a Christmas present. Georgina has black hair, and William is blond. Georgina is beautiful, but William, with his blond hair and slanted eyes, looks mournful and lost.

The chocolate egg has rolled to one corner and they are fascinated with the wooden box and the synthetic straw, and Georgina says she will put a little bird in it—a bird with a broken wing. I go with her to her room and I start pretending to cook with her pots and pans. She stares at me at first, with big, round eyes, and then gradually it dawns on her what I am doing and she begins to smile. Then the nanny comes to say my mother has called for me to take her place at the hospital for a while. I am flustered and run out, forgetting about Georgina. She runs after me, screaming, but her nanny catches her and holds her firmly. I am not going anywhere, the nanny says.

Memory 16: Good-Bye

The day my father arrives from the Philippines. No one told me he was coming. I simply enter the intensive care ward early one morning, and he is there. He is wearing a fine, brown cardigan, and his hair is neatly combed. He sits back on a hospital chair, not saying anything. His eyes are dry. He looks essentially the same person

as the one who sat at the breakfast table every morning when I was growing up. Yet, how strange it is to see him sitting here. This cold winter morning, with the snowflakes blowing by the half-open window.

I know I have to leave. There are too many people in the apartment, everyone getting on each other's nerves, and Mary Ellen has told me that my sister can continue in her present state for a long, long time. I go to the hospital alone and see my sister lying on the bed, inert, her eyes taped shut. I look at her cracked, swollen lips and jowls, her bluish fingers and toes, trying to fix her image in my mind. I am anxious when I see that she is alone again, no one there to massage her limbs or comb her hair. The nurses are busy with other patients and leave me alone. I stand there for a long time, simply watching. Now is the time, I think. Now is the time to tell her what she has meant to me, and how much I love her. I see her shudder, a movement I have observed before which distresses me until my mother says, "She is coughing." Now she coughs, and coughs some more. Her hand moves up slightly toward her stomach, but it is a half-gesture. Before the motion can be completed, the hand sinks down again, and she is still.

"I love you," I say, with all the strength I can muster, but the sound comes out small, almost inaudible. I stand there, immobilized. I want to kiss her, but dare not. I remember the doctor's words: "The next 48 hours are crucial. Any little infection could kill her." And I can feel, at the back of my throat, the scratchy beginnings of a cough. And I do not want anything to harm my sister. I do not want any harm to come to her at all.

I say good-bye to Mary Ellen, who is once again her nurse, and Mary Ellen gives me a tight little smile and her eyes remain detached, though I tell myself she is not unkind.

A few days later, when I receive word, I am at the office. I am speaking to someone and telling her how my mother has brought in a very famous faith healer from Mexico, and how this woman touched my sister's foot and said, with purest certainty, "She will recover." Then the phone rings, and it is my aunt. She says the words quietly. My head drops to the table and I realize now my aunt's words were the ones I was expecting to hear. My sobs are shattering and everyone in the office comes running and yes, I want everyone to know it, my sister is no more.

Later, there are other phone calls. From my mother, sounding far, far away, as if she has fallen into some deep well of grief and

exhaustion and not even the sound of my voice will suffice to pull her out of it. She keeps repeating, "To see her in a shroud—" I think of my sister in a winding sheet, on a hospital bed. Later, there is some back and forth on whether or not she should be cremated. I think it is important for my sister's body to be brought home—important because that is the Filipino way: to have an open casket for nine days, where everyone can come and look and say their farewells. But it is my brother-in-law who objects, and his wish prevails. He does not want his children to see their mother in a casket. She is cremated in New York, and her ashes are flown home to Manila by my mother. My niece, my sister's eldest child, draws a picture: a figure ascending to clouds, and beneath it, she has her father write the words: "My mother goes up to heaven, and leaves behind her bones."