

# A Village in the Fields

a novel



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For beginnings and endings, and endings and beginnings

In memory of my mother and father,  
Conchita C. Enrado (1926–2012)  
and  
Henry E. Enrado (1907–1995)

*Here is my tale for you*

*Sleep peacefully, for your labors are done, your pains  
Are turned into tales and songs*

— Carlos Bulosan, from “Now That You Are Still”

## CHAPTER 1

### Visitors

*Agbayani Retirement Village*

*Delano, California, August 1997*

The fever was relentless—like the hundred-degree heat that baked the brick-and-tile buildings of Agbayani Village. Fausto Empleo lay on his bed, the window wide open, the curtains still, the table fan unplugged. He didn't move, though his body pulsed with the chirping of crickets. The groundskeeper's dog barked, and Fausto imagined jackrabbits disappearing between the rows of vines. Dusk was spreading across the fields like the purple stain of a crushed Emperor grape. With the poles of Mylar ribbons stripped of their hard, silvery glint, the crows—their caws growing in strength—descended, stealing ripe berries as the shadows of the oleander bushes stretched across the grounds.

The heat lingered. Even as the world outside went black.

Fausto clapped his hands. On the third try, the nightstand lamp threw out a circle of light. His nurse, Arturo Esperanza, had given him the lamp weeks ago. There's a genie inside, Arturo had teased him every time Fausto clapped. But this time, he drew his arm across his face. He sucked in his breath and smelled burning wax and the faint trace of sulfur as if from a lit match. But he had no candles. When he lowered his arm, his room was studded with hundreds of tall, white tapers standing in pools of wax at the edge of his bed and on the windowsill, his desk, the top of the television set. The milky lava dripped from the plastic petals of the bouquet on his dresser, and rivulets ran across the linoleum. The flames merged into a constellation of blazing stars. He turned away, his face prickling from the heat.

He shut his eyes. "Well, God, are you calling me?" The wind-up clock on his desk ticked like a giant, tinny heart. "Because if you are," he said, struggling to unbutton his shirt, now cold and damp against his skin, "I'm *not* ready to go!"

Fausto opened his eyes. The candles were gone. He shook his head. Why did he say that? He was the last *manong* here—the last Filipino elder at the Village. The rest of his compatriots—all retired farm workers—

had passed away. He should be begging God to take him now, but that would mean he'd given up, and he couldn't admit to such a thing—not yet.

He clapped his hands and willed himself to sleep, but sleep came in fits. When he woke up, it was still dark outside. The lamp gave off a weak glow, sputtering like a trapped fly. The wind-up clock was stopped at 12:20. Before Fausto could raise his hands, the light went out. A second later the lamp came back on, only to be snuffed out in an instant. It threw out light again, but it soon dimmed and then the room went dark for good. Fausto drew the sheets to his chest, listening for a knock on the door. Didn't his mother tell him, as a child, never to answer a knock at night? It is an evil spirit come to get you, she had warned. If you say, "I am coming," the evil spirit will take you, and you will die. Though she had counseled him to be as silent as Death, he cried out now, thumping the left side of his chest, "I'm still alive, son-of-a-gun! You go get somebody else!"

Awake for the rest of the night, he watched the sun creep into his room, exposing his sweat-stained sheets. When the door creaked open, his shaking hands formed fists. But it was only Arturo, his square-bodied nurse, filling out the doorframe. Fausto pieced together Arturo's eyes, nose, and mouth as the nurse approached his bed. It was as if the rest of Arturo's face had sunk into a blanket of Central Valley fog.

Arturo pressed his hand against Fausto's forehead, blocking out the light. "*Ay buey!* Somebody put you in a freezer!"

"Did you bring candles last night?" Fausto called out as Arturo disappeared into the bathroom. He licked his cracked lips, the tip of his tongue tasting salt and copper.

Arturo returned with a bowl of water and sat on a chair by the bed. He pressed a steaming, wet towel against Fausto's forehead. "I didn't come here last night."

"There were hundreds of candles burning in my room." Fausto pointed to the floor, the empty windowsill. "And then an evil spirit tried to snatch me."

"*No te creo!*" Arturo's brow formed a thick line. He peeled off the towel and anchored the thermometer under Fausto's tongue. "Your fever gave you nightmares."

When the thermometer beeped, Fausto gave it to Arturo without looking at it. "My fever is gone," he proclaimed. "I'll live forever, eh?"

Then you'll be sorry for promises you made when you were a little boy."

"When was I *ever* a little boy?" Arturo's hand, bulky as a boxing glove, sank into the mattress. The seams of his white uniform strained with every movement.

"You were a little baby." Fausto held up his hands, inches apart. "You were born so early your father was afraid you would disappear. Then he thought he fed you too much. I told him it's better to have more meat than just bones. He was trying to be a good father. When we visit his grave, I always tell him he *was* a good father. Being a big boy made you strong!" Fausto laughed, though it hurt the sides of his head.

Arturo smiled. "He was a good father. He taught me to keep promises. Even if you live to 110—another twenty-five years!—I'll still watch over you."

"Ai, you can't tell what will happen." Fausto lowered his voice as Arturo wrung out the towel and placed it across his temple. "I made many promises."

"Well I've got a new promise—to get you out of this room!" Arturo bounced the mattress springs as he stood up. "Staying in bed so long makes you *loco*, makes you think an evil spirit is after you. I'll come back when it cools down. We'll go outside tonight, okay?"

Fausto shrugged. Arturo knew that when Fausto couldn't sleep, he took walks. Otis, the groundskeeper's German shepherd, never left his side, though Fausto tried to shoo it away.

He wanted to be with the crickets in the cool air. He always ended up at the edge of the Village, facing the open field, the health clinic, the old union building just beyond. What stretched before him was a great darkness that could swallow him whole if he stepped too far. When the stars came out, he felt small. And yet, he felt close to the earth.

"You go see your patients in town now," Fausto answered. He was getting lightheaded again, but Arturo wouldn't leave until he ate his meal. Fausto stuffed crackers in his mouth, melted them with gulps of hot soup from a Thermos to satisfy Arturo, who lingered by the door until Fausto waved him away.

He wanted the spirit to return so he could prove that he wasn't afraid, give himself a reason to fight. But the spirit didn't come.

Five days passed, and in that time, Fausto's fever broke for good. But he was still having trouble sleeping. One night, he battled unsettled sleep. Was the pressure in his head from the heat, or did his fever return?

He wavered in the moment separating deep sleep and awakening. It was as if he wanted to sleep finally, to remain in that state, but something was pulling him back to wakefulness. With a gasp, he shook free and fell into the night.

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Fausto stood at the end of the covered walkway. Faint, pink light edged the Sierra foothills to the east. A feral cat sat licking its fur by the barbecue pit. How bold the cat was, with Otis digging a hole by the brick building! Fausto was a little unsteady, but he was walking without pain. He pinched his hand—the sting ran to his fingertips.

He lifted his arms, inspecting the long-sleeved black shirt and black trousers he didn't remember putting on. "*Bumbye*, it will get hot before noon, and I'll burn up," Fausto said to himself.

"Fausto! Fausto Empleo!"

The voice shook him. He didn't hear the crunch of gravel as a man walked onto the grounds and paused next to a slender cypress tree that towered above him. The man fanned himself with a straw hat as his gaze swept the lawn and the buildings.

"Benedicto," Fausto whispered. "Benny."

"Fausto!" the man cried out, facing in his direction.

Fausto thought of running to his room, but his legs wouldn't move, and within a few dizzying moments, the man stood before him. Fausto waved his arms and stamped his feet.

The man stumbled back, the corners of his smile turning down. "Fausto, it's me. After twenty-four years, this is how you greet me?"

"*Ania iti impagarupmo nga aramidek?*" Fausto demanded.

"I don't know what to expect from you," Benny shrugged. "I should have come sooner, but you know how stubborn I am. You're stubborn too."

Fausto had always been half a head taller than his cousin. Now Benny, shrunken with a curved back, reached only to his chin. Benny was always slender, but his clothes hung on him as if he were a wire hanger and nothing more. The skin on his hands and face were pale and soft as if he hadn't spent a harsh summer working in the fields in years. Fausto wanted to hug Benny, but twenty-four years were still between them.

"You son-of-a-gun!" Fausto tried to keep the edge in his voice.



The knife creases in Benny's forehead vanished, though the spidery fine wrinkles remained. He smiled again. "*Kumusta?* How are you? I know you have been sick, but you look good, still strong."

"Eh? How did you know?"

Benny walked up to the long, U-shaped building and touched the weathered bricks set crooked in the mortar. When he brushed up against the rose bushes along the wraparound walkway, the flowers barely shivered. He stepped across the saltillo tiles without making a sound and stood beneath the porch, held up by silvered wooden poles. The sun had crept across the walkway, but all the curtains were still drawn shut.

Benny leaned into a splintered pole. "You are the last manong at Agbayani."

"You know Ayong and Prudencio are gone?"

Benny laughed nervously. "You were always with them." He passed a hand over his face, an old habit of his. "But I only see you, eh?"

A tremor worked its way out from the center of Fausto's body. "I was always with you too!" He kicked the base of the pole. He shouldn't be disrespectful after so much time passing. Benny might turn around and leave; he could see his cousin's eyes wavering. "*Saan nga bali.* Never mind," he said. "You must be hungry, traveling so far. We'll pick vegetables, eh? You still like your tomatoes dipped in *bagoong*?"

Fausto drew Benny to the vegetable garden. They walked around the sow-thistle sprouting in bunches from cracks in the ground. Wild grasses rose up like yellow flames spreading across the field, threatening to break the line of cacti towering over them. They passed leafless, blackened trees. When Otis barked behind them, Benny gave a start.

"That's Otis," Fausto said. "He'll not hurt you—he'll see you are with me."

The German shepherd trotted out from behind the building when Fausto whistled. But once it caught sight of them, the hair on its back stood on end. Otis sniffed the air. He stared them down and growled.

"C'mon, Otis!" Fausto called out, but the dog slunk away. "Ha! When I go walking at night, I can't get rid of that dog. Always tripping me up. Son-of-a-gun!"

Benny turned and walked past the empty rabbit pens, cracked pellets of feces still littering the floorboards. He squeezed through the half-open gate of the vegetable garden's chicken-wire fence to inspect the tomato plants. Overripe tomatoes lay flattened as if melted on the rocky soil.

“Even our vegetables are old!” Fausto laughed and put his foot through a cobweb that stretched across brittle leaves.

“Fausto,” Benny said, looking him in the eye. “What have you been doing with yourself all these years?”

Fausto worked his mouth open, but nothing came out.

“Nobody told me anything after we left,” Benny said. “Nida finally told me you stopped going to the parties and dances. You even stayed away from Domingo’s funeral! They said you did not want anyone seeing you, so everybody gave up.”

Fausto struck a lone stick with his heel, splintering it in two. “Is that what everybody has been saying? Macario is saying the same thing?”

“Nobody kept you from returning to Terra Bella.”

“Ai! You are all still punishing me!” Fausto cried out.

“*Kanayon nga insaksakit ka.* I was always on your side.”

“Until you abandoned me.” Fausto scattered the slivers of wood between them with a sweep of his shoe.

“You want to stay bitter? You want me to go away?” Benny flattened the crown of his straw hat on his head. But he didn’t leave.

“*Saan!* No!” Fausto motioned Benny to follow him. “You come with me.”

He led Benny to the empty field, stopping beside a Datsun station wagon that sat in a patch of nutsedge. Wide cracks in the car seats exposed brittle foam and cut a pathway from one end to the other. Wires stuck out of a hole where a radio had once been. Fausto placed his hands on the car hood, away from the crusted layers of pigeon droppings. “I take my walks and I stop here. I pretend I’m driving, going somewhere,” he said. “Sometimes to our house in Terra Bella. Sometimes back home in the Philippines.”

In his daydreams at Agbayani Village, he always made a grand entrance in his yacht-sized car at the plaza of their hometown of San Esteban, rolling down the tinted windows so his townmates could feel the blast of cold air from the air conditioner. He let them run their fingers across the buttery leather seats. “You have to be smart to drive one of these,” he said to the barefoot boys, whose eyes were as bright as the lighted dials on the dashboard. As he drove off to give the car to his parents, he heard his townmates cry out, “Ai, Fausto has a beautiful wife and baby. How generous he is with his wealth. He did the right thing, going to America!”

"You *are* rich. We are all rich," Benny said. "*Nagasa*t tayo."

"*We?*" Fausto said. "I'm not lucky. You are. You have Luz and Rogelio and BJ."

"You did the right thing for *you*. There was no other way."

"I believed in what we were fighting for." Fausto struck the car hood with his knuckles. "Things are different, Benny, here and in the fields. But I'm alone—I've been alone now for many months. And every day I'm reminded of what I gave up and lost."

"You did not lose everything." Benny pulled up his sleeve and glanced at his watch. "We'll be together again soon."

"Are we not together now? Are you leaving me again? You came all the way from Chicago and you're leaving already?" Fausto tried to focus on his cousin, who seemed to fade like the Sierra foothills in the glare of the morning light. They hadn't been together for more than a half-hour. It couldn't have been past eight in the morning, but Benny's watch read 2:20. Benny pulled the cuff of his shirt over his watch. Fausto wanted to grasp his shoulders to prove that his cousin was really there. Instead, he pinched the loose skin of his own arm. His nerves tingled.

"Rogelio is coming to see you," Benny blurted out.

"Rogelio?" Fausto shivered. "When is he coming? Why now? What will he tell me?"

"*Adda kayatna nga ibaga kenka.*" Benny's voice was tense, as he said again, "He'll be here soon to tell you. God willing, you already know."

"He's going to tell me the truth!"

Benny's head dipped, exposing the thinning crown of gray hair. "You still believe that, after all these years." His voice was full of uneasy wonder.

"Is this why I'm still alive, Benny? To hear the truth?"

"You'll believe what Rogelio tells you."

As Benny wiped his brow, his cuff pulled away from his bony wrist. Fausto saw that the hands on his watch had not moved at all.

"Benedicto, are you really here?" Fausto whispered. Benny looked at him as if he didn't understand. "*Agpayso nga addaka dito?*" he repeated.

"I go now." Benny adjusted his hat and strode toward the entrance.

"Where are you going? You just arrived. Benny, come back!"

Benny was several feet away from him already. "Wait for Rogelio. Don't be afraid. We'll be together again soon." His voice bounced back like an echo.

“Why should I be afraid?” Fausto shouted. He hurried after Benny, amazed that his cousin’s quick stride was putting great distance between them. “Wait for me!”

He reached the entrance of the Village, short of breath. A gust of wind swept across the land. The trunks of the palm trees in the open field leaned toward the ground. Palm fronds shivered. Dust stung his eyes. He searched the road, but saw only fine particles floating and settling all around him. Then the earth gave way beneath his feet.

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Fausto woke up on the wooden bench at the end of the walkway, his socks and shoes scattered at his feet, his clothes covered in dust. His forehead was cool, the back of his neck damp. If he’d had a fever last night, it was broken now. He had battled the evil spirit and won again. Maybe for good.

A car pulled into the driveway. The door opened and slammed shut. The crunch of gravel grew louder. Perhaps it was Rogelio.

“*Hombrecito!*” Arturo marched toward him, his fists swinging at his sides like dumbbells. “*Ay buey!* How long have you been out here?”

“Eh?” Fausto squinted in the sunlight.

“Who brought you here so early in the morning?” Arturo sat next to him, bending the wooden bench board. He touched Fausto’s forehead. “You feel cool to me.”

“My fever came back last night, but I have recovered for good now.” He felt lightheaded in his happiness. “I saw Benny. That is what gave me strength to come outside. Everything is okay now. He’ll return, and Rogelio is coming to see me.”

“Your cousin from Chicago? His son?” Arturo’s eyes watered.

“Benny came here, I tell you! I have to wait for him to return.” Fausto leaned forward, facing the entrance to the Village. A silver tabby licked its paws near a cypress tree. He grinned, pointing. “See that cat? It means visitors are coming.”

Arturo searched Fausto’s eyes. Fausto stared back, unblinking.

“You help me to my room. Then you bring me two more chairs and a table.” He swayed for a moment when Arturo pulled him up. The tiles were hard on the balls of his feet, making him wince with every step. His room, at the end of one side of the U-shaped building, seemed as far away as the clinic across the field.

“Hombrecito, no way you coulda’ come out here by yourself,” Arturo said. “Look at you—you can hardly walk. Who moved you?”

“*Saan nga bali!*” Fausto rapped his own head. He tried to think but couldn’t remember. “Ai, it does not matter,” he repeated.

The door to his room was flung wide open. The air inside was cool, as if the door had been open for some time, maybe all night. Fausto was still panting after Arturo helped him to the chair. He pointed in the direction of the dining hall. “You go get three plates with lots of rice and fried fish.”

“Three?” Arturo was out of breath too. He leaned over Fausto.

“Benny told me I did not lose everything.” Fausto rocked in his chair. “He said Rogelio would tell me. It’s better to hear it from him. That’s why I’m still here. My heart knew. I did not understand until Benny came.”

Arturo took Fausto’s wrist and felt for his pulse. “Hombrecito, you’ll be okay.”

A black moth scraped across his window. It bumped into the walls, spinning in circles, before flying out the door. Fausto’s heart raced. The burning candles, the stopped clock, lights going on and off. Even though he had defied Death twice, the moth made it clear. It was a sign of death. Before Rogelio’s arrival and Benny’s return. After all these years, he would be cheated again, but this time with the finality of death.

“We’ll go to the hospital.” Arturo’s voice echoed in his head.

“No,” Fausto whispered. “Call St. Mary’s. Bring Father Bersabel to me.”

He grasped Arturo’s hands and rested his face between his soft palms. Arturo’s fingers cooled his skin. The moment before his head fell back and the world went black, the room spiraled below him, Arturo’s hands like enormous wings lifting him up.

## CHAPTER 2

### What was left behind

Fausto woke up in his bed. The room was hazy, as if a dust storm had blown in through the window. When he breathed, he imagined specks being sucked into his nose and swirling in his lungs. He thought of when he picked table grapes decades ago—Muscat, Thompson, Ribier, Emperor, Calmeria—from July through September, from one vineyard to the next on Mr. Cuculich's acres of farmland. The farm workers wore scarves or bandanas, or wrapped and pinned T-shirts around their noses and mouths to keep from breathing dust. Some duct-taped the ends of their gloves to their long shirtsleeves and the tops of their boots to their jeans. Everybody wore straw hats or baseball caps. But it was useless. Late afternoons, when Fausto peeled away layers of clothes, dust clung to everything. It seeped through his outer clothes and dirtied his undershirt. Dust and sweat turned his white socks muddy brown. Even his teeth felt gritty. Fausto ran his tongue along his teeth, expecting grit.

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"Fausto! Come home with me!" His wife, Marina, gripped his arm.

Nearby, a scratchy voice boomed from a bullhorn: "Your boss says we're Communists! They're trying to scare you. We're trying to bring justice to the fields!"

The picketers waving red-white-and-black signs and the grape packers at the roadside field station moved back and forth like an uneasy wave. Across the road, plainclothes policemen, sheriffs, and deputies in crew cuts and sunglasses leaned against patrol cars, arms folded against their chests, pistols in holsters bulging at their waists.

The picketers chanted the Spanish word for "strike": "*Huelga! Huelga!*" "*Esquiroles! Scabs! Come out of there!*" a woman shouted, and held up a sign.

Grape pickers, who came from Mexico in buses supplied by the growers, swarmed the fields. The replacement workers—scabs, the strikers called them, while the Mexican strikers called them *esquiroles*—kept their heads down. But one sparred back.

"We need to feed our family! Take care of *your* family!" a man yelled. Before anyone could respond, gunshots rang out. A woman screamed

down the road, setting off sirens. The law enforcers ran toward the crowd where picket signs converged, their boots pounding against the blacktop. Fausto pushed Marina in the opposite direction. She fled without a word, abandoning the lunchbox she'd brought Fausto on the rocky soil. He caught a flash of her white blouse as she drove off in their Bel Air, but she did not offer him her face. Even as he told himself she'd be safer at home, his muscles tightened as he spun around and headed into the fields.

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Fausto clenched his teeth and dug his heels into the thin mattress as if that would stop the shouting. With Rogelio coming, he would have to relive his past, recount it to Rogelio because Rogelio would want to know his side of the story. Fausto owed him that, and much more. He squinted at the clock, its hands still stuck on 12:20. Stomach grumbling, he knew it was close to dinnertime, which meant Arturo would return soon. Earlier in the morning, instead of calling the *pinoy* priest, Arturo rushed him to the emergency room, where he was examined and released. Fausto hushed Arturo, who questioned the doctor's judgment. He didn't want to stay in the hospital. What if Rogelio were looking for him at that very moment? Under protest, Arturo brought him back to Agbayani Village, vowing to check up on Fausto morning and evening—and midday, if his schedule permitted.

Fausto didn't ask if Arturo avoided calling the priest because the nurse was just as superstitious as he was. Fausto didn't want the Evil Spirit to think Father Bersabel was giving him his last rites—a sure sign that he'd surrendered. Even if Fausto was only given a blessing, the priest's presence would draw the Evil Spirit to his door, outside his window, waiting. Fausto was not about to tempt anyone.

Something bumped up against his door, making Fausto bolt up in bed. The knob turned and Arturo burst in, clutching two grocery bags to his chest. Fausto looked past the nurse. He passed his hand over his face. Everything was okay. Arturo was here now—with nobody, nothing else behind him—and he had brought Fausto his lunch, which he laid out on a TV tray. While Fausto ate, Arturo weaved in and out of English and Spanish, first complaining about his Camaro having trouble starting in the heat wave and then declaring that the doctor had made a hasty decision.

“He didn't check the clouds in your eyes.” Arturo unpacked cans of

chicken soup and fruit in heavy syrup on Fausto's desk with a thud.

"Okay, Nurse Know-It-All! Why don't you trade places with that doctor? He sees I'm okay, I'm getting stronger." Fausto lowered his voice. "For Rogelio's sake."

"Hombrecito, that kind of thinking is gonna make you sicker!"

"He's coming, I tell you!" Fausto insisted. "Benny came just to tell me."

"*Dios, me ayuda a ayudarlo,*" Arturo mumbled.

Fausto rattled one of the TV-tray legs. "You say you want to help me? Then come here."

Arturo moved the tray away from the bed and sat down, his face shiny with sweat.

"How long are you staying tonight?"

"As long as you need me," Arturo responded. "I'll spend the night if you want me to."

"I want you to listen to my stories," Fausto said. "I want to get everything right before Rogelio comes."

Arturo looked down at his scuffed white shoes. "Don't," he said, in a soft voice.

"Ai, then go away!" Fausto thundered. He punched Arturo's massive shoulder, the flesh soft, but the bulk of it unyielding.

"I said I would stay." Arturo grabbed his fists. "You want to talk about the strikes?"

Fausto took a deep breath. He allowed Arturo to massage his fingers until they went limp. "Sure," he said slowly. "But you have to go back to when I was a boy in San Esteban."

"*That far back?*" Arturo rolled his eyes.

Fausto shook his hands free. "I was born in 1912. I came here in 1929."

"I guess I *will* be spending the night here." Arturo leaned against the headboard and crossed his arms, bunching up his white shirt. "Go on then, *hombrecito.*"

Fausto blinked several times, suddenly speechless.

"You worked the land back home too, right?" Arturo coached him.

Fausto raised his chin to keep his lips from trembling. "My father owned several hectares of land. We planted rice, tobacco, and agave—*maguey*. We were not rich, but we were not poor! And I had an American education. I was not as ignorant as Pa said I was!"



*"You were so full of promise, Fausto, but you were meant to work the land."*

Fausto jerked his head in the direction of the open window. The curtains hung limp. He didn't say anything to Arturo; it was not Arturo's voice that had spoken to him.

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When Fausto's father, Emiliano, began taking him to the rice fields to plant and harvest at the age of seven—the same age his father and grandfather had begun to work—Fausto knew he would not follow in their footsteps. He would not get up before the sun rose and ride the *carabao*—the plodding water buffalo—to the rice fields for the rest of his life. He would not harvest maguey and strip, wash, cure, and braid its fibers into rope and then haggle with agents over how many pesos could be paid for several kilos of maguey. Somehow, he would find a way to attend the American school in San Esteban. His uncles had allowed his older cousins—Macario, Caridad, Serapio, and Domingo—to go to school but only when they weren't needed in the fields. They fell back a few grades until Uncle Johnny, Macario's father, forced his son to quit for good, and Fausto's other cousins quit soon after.

Fausto couldn't hang around the schoolhouse after classes to catch the American teacher's attention because he came home from the fields after sundown, long after Miss Arnold had closed up the wooden building. He knew one of the students' mothers cleaned the schoolhouse on Saturdays. Fausto convinced his *lelang*, his grandmother, to stop by the schoolhouse on their way to the marketplace one Saturday and talked his way into polishing the floors for half of the four centavos the woman was earning. The musty odor gave him a coughing fit, but he rubbed the floors with petroleum-soaked banana leaves until the wood gleamed like the bow on Miss Arnold's hat. His *lelang* agreed to keep his job a secret; Fausto told her he wanted to replace their sickly farm animals with the money he was making. He hoped Miss Arnold would show up while he was working, but she never came.

No matter. When he finished cleaning, he opened up books stuffed on shelves that spanned the length of the room. He cut his fingertips along the edge of the pages, but he minded them less than the calluses on his palms. He copied the curves and lines from the books onto the slate board and stood back to admire his work before erasing all trace of white chalk. He stared at the colorful pictures tacked on the walls until his *lelang* returned and scolded him that his secret would be found

out. The following week, he asked one of the girls from town who was a student to help him write a sign. The next Saturday morning, he left it at the entrance of the schoolhouse: "Floor cleaned by Fausto Empleo."

By the third Saturday, when nothing had happened, he realized he would have to introduce himself to Miss Arnold, without his mother's and his lelang's knowledge, at St. Stephen's, where the teacher and his family worshipped. After mass, he spied Miss Arnold greeting members of the congregation. The men craned their necks—she towered above them with a head piled high with brown hair—and saluted. "Good morning, Miss Arnold!" they said in lively voices. The women bowed and addressed her as *maestra*. She strode across the gravel walkway, her big feet marching in dusty brown boots. It was a warm day and yet she wore a wool suit—a long-sleeved jacket and a stiff skirt that puffed out—with a blouse that covered her neck to her chin. As she came closer, he saw wrinkles in her sunburnt face. Gray hairs poked out along her hairline like fine wire.

She would have walked by Fausto if he hadn't stepped into her path. "Miss Arnold, are your floors shiny enough?" He shifted his feet; his toes curled in shoes that didn't fit.

She studied his face for a moment before responding in Ilocano in a bright voice, "You must be Fausto Empleo! I see you leave your signature like an artist." She took his hand and shook it. She didn't seem to notice his calluses. Her own hands, as big as a man's, were covered with brown spots. "You look to be seven years old, ready for school. Why are you cleaning my floor and not attending my class?" She bent down, her eyes level with his. She slid her glasses to the tip of her slender nose. Her eyes were as clear as the sea off of San Esteban on a cloudless day. He couldn't stop staring.

"I have to help my pa with our land," he answered in English. Fausto stole a glance past Miss Arnold. Father Miguel, in his starched white cassock, was greeting his mother and lelang. "My pa says I'm a good worker in the fields."

"Oh, dear," she said in English, and held her cheek as if her tooth ached. "I'm sure you are a good worker, but you need to go to school! We teach industrial skills, not just reading and writing. The whole world is changing. You must realize we are living at a time of great progress. You can't be left behind. School is for everybody."

Fausto's head swam. While even the laborers were teaching

themselves English—American and English-speaking businessmen had flooded the islands since the Spaniards were driven out—what he knew was not enough. “I know about school,” he said, looking past the yellow-flowered *gumamela* bushes and acacia trees, in the direction of the schoolhouse. “After I clean the floors, I look at the books and the pictures on the walls,” he said, then cocked his head to one side. “But if you want to teach reading in English, you need books that have more words than pictures. We like to work hard.”

Miss Arnold pursed her lips, holding back a smile. Tiny wrinkles branched out around her mouth. “I will consider your practical suggestion, Fausto. Your work ethic will serve you well in school, and you would be a big help to me in the classroom. I strongly suggest you come to my class.” She sat on her haunches before him, her blue skirt billowing out and sweeping the ground. “A poet wrote about the difficult journey we Philippine teachers have had to undertake. The end of the poem says: ‘Remember, while you try to do your parts, / That, if one single spark of light you leave / Behind, your work will not have been in vain.’” She broke out grinning. “Fausto Empleo, you already exhibit a spark of light, but you can be *more* with schooling. How rewarding that would be for you, your parents, and me—to be *more!*”

She promised to visit his house to request permission for him to go to school. After she left, he caught sight of his mother walking homeward, his baby brother joined at her hip, his sisters skipping behind her, his *lelang* trailing and eyeing him. Nearby, the town *presidente’s* daughters greeted their American teacher with curtsies. The two girls, dressed in striped skirts and filmy *blusas* as pale as their faces, were waiting for their *calesa*, which had pulled into the courtyard. A dark-skinned man hoisted the girls to their covered seats. He sat in front and snapped his whip against the horse’s oily black flank. Fausto’s sisters called after him, and he ran to catch up, wincing in his shoes. He looked back as the two glazed yellow wheels spun in circles and the red-painted calesa lurched forward, dipping in and out of the ruts beyond the arched entryway. It soon passed him and his family, though he broke out into a lively gait, imagining he could outrun the horse.

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Miss Arnold came the following Sunday, just as Fausto and his family were returning from church. When his mother saw her, she hurried across the yard, jouncing his baby brother in her arms, ignoring the

teacher. Even his lelang retreated indoors without a word. Alarmed, Fausto kicked off his shoes and outran his mother to the backyard. His father, shirtless, pant legs rolled up to his knees, had just entered the pigs' pen, scraping a knife against a sharpening stone. The only pig in the pen was the one his sisters had named "Ti Presidente" because it pushed the other pigs away from the trough during feeding time. It already weighed fifty kilos, big enough to feed the family for weeks. Fausto ran harder, hoping to reach his father before the pig's throat was slit.

"Pa!" Fausto hopped up on the fence, his arms dangling over the top rail.

His father's eyes flickered when he saw Miss Arnold crossing the yard. He threw down the knife and stone, and came to the open gate. Fausto's cheeks reddened at the sight of his father's exposed chest. His mother hesitated on the other side of the fence as Miss Arnold came shoulder to shoulder with her. Miss Arnold glanced at the tethered pig, whose back hooves scratched at the clay soil. His father retrieved the knife and cut the cord that bound the pig's feet. It kicked up on all fours, darted to the far end of the pen, and tunneled into a stack of hay. The upended straw quaked.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Empleo," Miss Arnold said in Ilocano, in a voice that Fausto decided was always bright and pleasant, no matter the situation.

When she bowed, his father's upper lip curled. Fausto dug his fingernails into the railing. He wished he'd advised Miss Arnold to wear a hat with a wider brim like that of a woven bamboo *salakot*. His father was likely thinking that her hat, which didn't shade the sun from her face, was for vanity's sake.

"I'm here to appeal to you," she went on, despite the chickens pecking at her feet. "I would like your son to join my classroom so he can receive an education."

"He does not need an education."

"Good heavens!" Miss Arnold laughed. Even her sea-blue eyes were laughing. "Everybody needs an education, especially when you are born into this world at a disadvantage. It's the only way to move up in this world! So many children here are benefiting from going to school. They have grown up to become teachers and *presidentes* in other towns. It's for the good of the community." She swept her gaze from Fausto to his mother as if trying to rally them to her cause.

"You cannot know what is good for us." His father straightened his spine, though he was still shorter than she.

Fausto buried his head in the crook of his arm. His toes began to slip from the rail. Hanging there, he felt as if his life were the thing being suspended.

"Emiliano," his mother said. "Miss Arnold is a guest in our country, in our town."

Fausto's baby brother, Cipriano, cooed in her arms.

"Do guests tell their hosts what to do?" His father's voice crackled.

His mother stepped back, pressing her cheek against Cipriano's ear.

"Mr. Empleo," Miss Arnold said, holding her head high, "I came to the Philippine Islands in 1901 with a mission to educate your youngsters. I've only been in San Esteban for two months, but I've lived in your country for eighteen years. I don't consider myself a guest anymore. More importantly, I've taken the interests of the people of San Esteban—indeed, of the Philippine Islands—to heart. Many of the teachers who first came here when I did have already gone home, trusting the future of the school system to the natives, but I confess I'm not ready to go just yet. Besides the lovely way I've been treated here and the lovely time I've had, something else has been keeping me put, although I didn't know what it was—until now." She glanced at Fausto.

His father gave her a withering look. "My son will answer for himself."

Miss Arnold clapped her hands. "Excellent! After all, it is *his* future."

The three of them turned to Fausto, who had shrunk behind the fence.

"What do you say, Fausto?" his father prodded, his words sharp, like a *talibon* knife poking at his gut.

"I would like to try," Fausto said slowly, trying to summon up the courage, the words, his desire. "Pa, I would like to go to school and get an education."

But his father shook his head. "I cannot lose his work in the fields."

"If Fausto cannot attend school during the day, we can create a special schedule for him," Miss Arnold said, her smile persisting. "When is he free?"

"Free?" His father looked skyward and wiped his brow with his forearm. "We have a longer work day than the sun."

"Sunday is our day of rest," Miss Arnold said, "but for Fausto's sake I can open up the schoolhouse a few hours in the afternoon and give him

some lessons. Will that be acceptable to you, Mr. Empleo?"

"Fausto can go to your schoolhouse for two hours every Sunday afternoon," he said, "but if he is too tired to work on Monday, he must stop learning."

"I understand, Mr. Empleo." She thrust her hand out to him. When he hesitated, she added, "I grew up in a farm in Missouri. My father recently retired, although a farmer never really retires. He swore he'd rather die threshing grain than rocking in a chair. I can see you and my father have that much in common. I don't mind getting my hands dirty. It means you're a hard worker. My father would say that and he's right."

He was slow to take her hand. When they pulled away, Miss Arnold said, "We have a garden behind the school. If you care to know, I believe in the dignity of labor."

She waved good-bye, winking at Fausto as if they had secretly plotted together. When she was gone, when he no longer heard the marching footfalls of her boots, Fausto expected his father to strike his head. Instead, his father flicked off clay stuck to his heel.

"Do not be angry," his mother said.

His father chuckled. "Do you remember when that other American teacher forced Johnny to send Macario to school?" he said. "My brother told that teacher she could have him as long as his work in the fields did not suffer. She knew nothing about farming here. Maybe Fausto will last a few weeks." He cocked his head. "Maybe less."

Fausto jumped off the fence, making the rails quiver. He wanted his father to realize that he'd been listening the whole time, but his father didn't care. He spied his lelang in the kitchen window, but when their eyes met she stepped behind the curtain.

"Emiliano!" his mother said. "Do not be so cruel to Fausto."

"I am protecting my family. That is what fathers do." He tossed the cord at Fausto's feet. "Fausto, get Ti Presidente."

The pig grunted at the empty trough. Fausto would have chased it out of the yard and down the road, chased it into a field thick with *bagbagotot* bushes. Instead, he tackled the pig and tied its legs so tight the cord cut into its pink skin. Squealing, the pig flailed, flinging mud on his Sunday trousers, digging its cloven hoof into his bare toes. Fausto kicked the animal's hairy behind and dragged it toward his father, who stood with the knife in his fist.

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Though his father worked him hard, Fausto never missed school. When Miss Arnold presented him with a map of the world for his geography lesson, he was stunned to see how small the Islands were compared to other countries, how vast the oceans were, how big the world was. He listened to stories about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. By the end of his first year, before he turned eight, he could read and write a little in English, and he could add and subtract. He was looking forward to mastering English and learning the industrial skills she was teaching the older boys. But when he came home after mass one Sunday, Miss Arnold was at the door, talking to his mother, who was home sick. He wondered why his teacher was not at church. She rested her hand on his shoulder, and then withdrew it, her touch so fleeting he thought he had dreamed it up.

"I've come to say good-bye, Fausto," she said.

"Miss Arnold is needed at home," his mother said. "Her father is very ill."

Miss Arnold patted a handkerchief across her moist upper lip. "Your father was right about one thing: In the end, our families need us and we need them."

Fausto wanted to strike the door. He didn't want his father to be right. He didn't want Miss Arnold to admit it. But he held his arms down, digging his fists into his thighs.

"Are you coming back?"

"I'll miss the planting season. It's almost here, isn't it?" she said, as if she didn't hear him. "It's my favorite time—accordions and guitars, singing, dancing in the mud. Such a lovely tradition, such a lovely people." She fastened her gaze on Fausto. "I'm going home for good, but I hope to see you again. Perhaps you can come visit me outside of Kansas City when you're all grown up."

Fausto's father emerged from the shadows and stood in the doorway. "There is no reason for him to leave San Esteban," he said.

Miss Arnold locked eyes with Fausto. "I grew up on a farm, and look where I've been in my life! You can become anything you want."

His mother coughed into the sleeve of her *blusa*. "We can never imagine sending Fausto to the States, Miss Arnold. It is too dear a price for us," she murmured.

"I'm so sorry!" Miss Arnold's cheeks reddened. "Please excuse me for my indiscretion. I should leave now and continue with my packing. I've

accumulated so many things in my eighteen years here!”

“Have you not seen your father in eighteen years?” His father’s voice was sharp.

Miss Arnold stood still for a moment. “No,” she whispered, blinking hard.

His father bowed his head. “Miss Arnold, we are sorry for your loss.”

“Pa, her father is not lost yet,” Fausto said. It was bad luck to talk about someone as if he or she had already passed away.

“It *is* a loss,” Miss Arnold said. She stuffed her handkerchief beneath her sleeve and tugged on the stiff cuff of her suit jacket. “Thank you all for your kindness.”

Fausto stood in her way. “What will become of our lessons?”

“Fausto!” His mother pinched his arm, but he couldn’t feel a thing.

“Let Miss Arnold go,” his father said.

“Josefa Zamora will be taking my place,” Miss Arnold said. “She told me she will try to open up the schoolhouse on Sunday afternoons for you.”

Fausto didn’t know what else to say. Time would not stop. He stepped aside.

“I have fond memories of my stay here,” Miss Arnold said to Fausto’s mother and father. She knelt down in front of him and gathered him in her arms.

The lavender scent in her hair made him think of the bars of soap at the schoolhouse that her students used to wash their hands after lunchtime.

She touched his cheek. “I shall miss you the most, my little spark of light. So full of promise. Remember, you can do more. You have it in you.”

She stood up, sucking the air around him, and hurried away. Fausto ran after her, but he stopped at the gate. He watched her arms swing by her sides. Her feet, in their brown, button-up boots, marched as they always did across the dirt road. Then she was gone, swallowed by the bagbagotot bushes, the bend in the road.

“No more,” his father said in Ilocano. He clamped his hand on Fausto’s shoulder. “School made you worthless in the fields. I was going to stop it, but she did it for me.”

Fausto locked his knees, dug his feet in the earth. He wanted to bolt after Miss Arnold. She was still somewhere down that road. He



imagined himself next to her, ignoring the blisters on his feet from his shoes, wanting to keep pace with her boots. "If I finish seventh grade, I can teach school too," he insisted. "Just like Josefa Zamora."

His father snorted, and said, "Teaching is for teachers." His father spun him around and turned his hands over. "See?" With his leathery finger he rubbed the calluses in Fausto's skin. "You are meant to work the land."

He let go and strode inside, his mother following, her head down. His lelang, quiet as a house lizard, emerged from behind the kitchen door and touched his sleeve.

Fausto turned to her. "Lelang Purificación, are you with Pa?"

Her face was full of hard lines and sorrow. "Your father has his reasons, Fausto. You are too young to understand. There is so much you must learn."

"I *was* learning!" he said. "You are all against me. Now I am alone."

"Alone?" She stared at him as if he had spoken in a foreign tongue. "You will never be alone, Fausto. You will always be with us."

He shook his head and ran out of the yard, covering several hundred meters before realizing he'd gone in the opposite direction of Miss Arnold. Each breath scalded his lungs. His legs were giving out; his toes were wet with popped blisters. He fell to the side of the road, crashing into a thatch of cogon grass. Its sharp-pointed leaves pricked his face. He rolled over and pawed at his ears, his lelang's words burrowing like a tick.

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Fausto's scalp prickled in the Central Valley heat. He stood by the window, hoping for a breeze. The sky was as faded as a pair of old jeans, the wispy clouds billowed like worn cotton shirts hung out to dry. Palm trees in the distance rose above the flat earth. When he first arrived in the Valley, he asked an old-timer how these trees ended up lining the streets of towns in the area. The Philippines had so many palm trees, and the land was lush from the rainy seasons, not dry most of the year like it was in the Valley. The old-timer told him the local farmers sold their produce in Los Angeles. If the farmers profited from a good crop, they bought and hauled back palm trees, and planted them along the private roads leading up to their houses and nearby streets. It was a sign, visible for miles, of their prosperity. Fausto laughed. If only that had been the situation in San Esteban!

Arturo spoke up. “Hombrecito, so Miss Arnold inspired you to go to America?”

Fausto moved away from the window, each step a test for his legs. “She opened up the world for me. But after she left, nothing was going to change. Pa made sure of that. When I was twelve, my cousins—Macario, Cary, Serapio, and Domingo—left for America. Macario met some rich Filipino boys who studied at American colleges. He got it in his head that he could be like them—a *pensionado*—having the American government pay for their education in the US.” Fausto shrugged. It sounded silly to him now.

He walked slowly around in circles, the room too small to hold his restlessness. “Cary, Serapio, and Domingo left with their families’ blessing, but Uncle Johnny was against Macario leaving. So Macario ran off with them. Uncle Johnny accused him of stealing from the profits of their harvest of maguey. Benny and I refused to believe Macario could steal and lie to his own family. Then Uncle Johnny blamed everyone else for Macario’s escape.”

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Uncle Johnny ranted in front of San Esteban’s town hall as he wandered from one acacia tree to the next in the plaza: “The Americans said they would liberate us, but they are just like the Spaniards! Our children come home from their schools wanting to be like the rich Americans! They steal our children’s minds and then their bodies!” Fausto’s father and his uncles carried off Uncle Johnny, who bellowed all the way home, blaming God for Macario’s disobedience, his disappearance, for the fact that he would never see his son again.

Macario sent Fausto and Benny letters, accompanied by a studio portrait. After his little brother fell asleep, Fausto pulled out the photograph from beneath his woven mat and studied every detail under the kerosene lamp. During the day, when he stared at his reflection in the flooded fields, he didn’t see a teenager, brown as mud, planting rice. He saw his four cousins in all their finery. In the portrait, flat-painted clouds puffed up behind them. The flowery rug beneath his cousins’ leather shoes looked too expensive to be walked on. Cary and Macario stood in back. Serapio and Domingo sat straight-backed in stuffed chairs, their legs crossed at the knees. Cary clutched a pair of gloves with covered buttons. They all wore three-piece wool suits. The high, starched collars and bulbous knot of their wide ties seemed to hold up their chins, their

proud smiles. Cary and Macario wore their fedoras with a corner tipped to one side, shadowing an eye. Serapio and Domingo's fedoras sat on their laps like prizes.

Macario wrote of the plentiful jobs and high wages. He bragged about the temptations—American women who flirted with them, Chinese gamblers who dared them to try their luck at winning fistfuls of American dollars—that constantly battled for their money and attention. The postmarks on the envelopes hailed from different towns and states across America, but in the last couple of years Los Angeles, California, had become their home. “Hope Street is calling you,” Macario wrote. “When will you answer, Fausto?”

When Fausto and Benny transplanted rice shoots or washed maguey in the sea, they daydreamed of fine clothes, the affections of American girls, the vast campuses of American colleges. Fausto never heard from Miss Arnold again, but he kept hearing her voice in the rice fields, in the wind that tousled the ocean waves, at night when he couldn't sleep—*You can become anything you want*. Wasn't Macario proof? It was good enough for Fausto and Benny. They saved their money, and in five years they could afford the price of boat tickets.

One evening after dinner had been cleared from the table, he followed his father to the backyard. “Pa,” he said, “Benny and I are going to America.”

His father turned around, even in height with Fausto. He had celebrated his forty-first birthday earlier in the year, though he looked older. His arms and legs were hard with muscle, but his skin was as tough as the cured hide of a carabao. He held out his palms, slashed with rope burns from guiding the water buffalo across the muddy fields. “Do you think I will let you go when Macario and your cousins have never come back?” he said. “Your poor Uncle Johnny has no son to help him with his farm work.”

“Pa, Macario is Uncle Johnny's only son, but our family is large enough to help with the fields and the animals.”

Shock spread across his father's face. “Is it a matter of giving up one son so easily because I have another? Sons are not bargained with like bales of maguey!”

“That was not my intent,” Fausto said. “It is fate. Like Lelong's life, your life.”

“Your lelong and I chose to build our lives here.” He held out his

arms to encircle his land, his son. "You can choose too, only you choose to go away!"

"Pa, I want to change my luck," Fausto said.

His father looked past him, though the dazed expression never left his face. "Miss Arnold," he said finally. "After she left, I dreamed her ghost returned. She cracked your skull and everything she taught you spilled out and swept you into the sea." He rocked on his bare heels as if seized by waves. "The dream came to me again and again. I worried you would leave one day. But time passed. I thought you were happy. I fooled myself, picking which girl in San Esteban you would marry. I was going to give you the largest rice field on your next birthday." He raised his hand, which loomed like a wall that Fausto couldn't scale. "I cannot stop you. We are done here."

"Benny and I leave next month," Fausto said. "We have paperwork to complete in Manila. A doctor has to examine us."

As he spoke of his plans, which he and Benny had plotted so carefully, so secretively, they became as real as the tamped soil beneath his feet. But his father walked away before he could finish. Fausto wasn't angry. He watched his father retreat to the house and climb the stairs to his bedroom, the wooden steps creaking, exploding, echoing with each footfall—the sound, Fausto imagined, of his father's heart breaking.

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The night before he and Benny left, Fausto carried out his chores. He used to hate checking the pigs, asleep in their pens, but he gazed with tenderness at the masses of pink fat glistening beneath his lamplight. He took in the smell of hay mixed with mud, the gassy stench of wet excrement. When he heard footsteps behind him, he knew it was his father, but he didn't turn around until his father thrust a piece of paper into his chest. Fausto's lantern had run out of kerosene, so his father lit a torch and held it above them. The carabao stirred in the corner of the yard, its eyes glittering beneath drowsy lids, its nose shining wetly. Light flickered over rows of mongo beans on the vine. Shadows of green bamboo shoots cut across the earth. All he could hear was his father's shallow breath.

The letter, written by Cary to his mother, announced that he had tuberculosis. He expected to die because the doctors told him he would if he didn't take care. He couldn't work to help pay for rent. Jobs were scarce or hard. It was a different kind of hard than working in the rice

fields. They had no money for school. The Americans said cruel words to them wherever they went. Cary was trying to save enough money to return home.

Fausto turned his face away from the heat. "Why are you showing this to me?"

"Do you want to end up like Cary? Spending precious money and then coming home sick so your mother has to take care of you?" The torch shook in his hand. Bits of charred wood flew and skipped across the ground. "Your Auntie Lilia gave me this letter."

Fausto looked at the date. Four months had gone by since the letter was written. He tried to remember when he had received the last portrait of his cousins. He would have noticed if his handsome cousin was ill. Instead, he recalled how splendid Cary looked, his curly hair thick and healthy, his smile relaxed and sure of himself. Macario bragged that Cary had the looks to rival Gary Cooper. He could become a big movie star. It was the reason they moved to Hollywood.

Fausto swallowed hard, grimacing as if he had bitten into *parya*, the melon's warty skin bitter to the taste. "If this letter is true, Auntie Lilia would not shame Cary or herself in front of everybody. He would not want her to show this letter to anyone else."

Purple blotches the color of *tarong* deepened across his father's cheeks like a bruise. "Stupid boy! You think I am tricking you?" He slapped the piece of paper with the back of his hand. "Lilia is trying to save you at the expense of her own shame!"

His father's shouting roused the carabao, which shifted its weight and bellowed. A few pigs grunted, then fell silent. The goats crowded to the front of their pen, rustling hay beneath their hooves. Fausto stared at the crossed-out words written with such force that the onion paper was torn in places. How could he accuse his father of forging a letter that involved his cousin and auntie? The families were so close, the town so small.

"You are trying to weaken me with this letter," Fausto said.

"I am trying to strengthen you!"

"I am leaving—whether it is true or not." Fausto dropped the letter. He ran into the house, heart pounding, but stopped to spy from the kitchen window.

His father pierced the letter with the torch. Sparks flew across the yard. Smoke curled up. The letter crackled, turning into ashes. Black bits twirled away into the darkness. The rest crumbled at his father's

leathery feet. He turned his back to the house, with his head held high.

Fausto retreated to the second floor. A candle glowed in his lelang's bedroom, though she was usually asleep by this time. He hesitated before pulling the crocheted curtain aside. She was sitting up, as if waiting for him. He sat on her bed and inhaled the musty, bitter scent of betel nut mixed with lime on her lips and red-stained teeth.

"Lelang Purificación," he began, "Pa will not give me his blessing."

"You should be honored by the burden of his love," she said. She sighed and stared out her window, the *capiz*-shell panels slid open all the way to let the stars in.

"What about you, Lelang? Will you try to change my mind?"

She pursed her lips as if she had swallowed betel-nut juice. "I tell you something not to change your mind but so you are not ignorant."

Fausto laughed. "Lelang, I am going to America to *gain* knowledge."

She kneaded her fingers. Veins, like thick twine wrapped around her fist, warped the shape of her hands. "You know June 12th, 1898?"

"Independence Day," Fausto answered. "The Americans helped us defeat Spain. Miss Arnold taught me about the Americans' involvement."

She pulled her shawl over her shoulders, though the air was warm. "There was another war after the Spaniards were removed, but you will not find it in American history books. Your father was too young to know what was happening in the lower provinces and on the other islands—we do not talk of the bad times—but I told him years later, when he could understand. He never forgot, but now you will make him think of it all the time."

"Remember what?" Fausto's voice was as taut as the woven mat stretched across his lelang's bed.

"The war with the Americans," she said softly. "I received word that my parents and sisters and brothers were being sent to a detention camp set up by American troops in Batangas, my hometown. We thought the news was false, but your Lelong Cirilo decided to bring them here to stay with us. When he left, your father was only ten years old. More than a year and a half passed before your lelong came back alone. He had lost so much weight. He would not say what became of my family. The day he came back was the day my family ceased to exist. It was also the day your lelong ceased to exist."

Cirilo, who had welcomed the ousting of the Spanish government before his prolonged absence, kept his sons out of the American schools

that were cropping up across the islands. He swore under his breath at the American soldiers who passed through town. Two American Negroes arrived one day and settled in San Esteban. Cirilo welcomed them into his home for meals and went to their homes as a guest. When he returned one evening, he told Purificación that they had deserted the American army. "They will never go back to the States. They said they are freer in our country than in their own," he insisted, though she didn't believe him. He told her the white American soldiers had called him "nigger" and "savage," words that they also hurled at the Negroes. "My friends call me brother, and there is great truth to that," he said.

Fausto couldn't recall visits to their house by Negro soldiers, though he remembered seeing two Negro men at his lelong's funeral. Cirilo always had snowy white hair as long as Fausto could remember and looked much older than his sixty-five years when he passed. Each year had separated him further from Batangas, but keeping a secret from his family for so many years had aged him and kept the memories fresh.

When Cirilo lay dying, he took his wife's hand and said, "Forgive me, Purificación, for burdening you with silence and now the truth about your family." He spoke as if he'd just arrived amid the makeshift detention camps in Batangas. He was called an *insurrecto*, an insurgent, by American soldiers who captured him outside the hastily drawn boundaries. As a prisoner, he heard stories of soldiers destroying crops and confiscating possessions, and he was forced to witness the torching of houses and rice-filled granaries beyond the barbed fences. Black clouds blotted out the sun. Green fields turned to gray as ash rained down. Ash clung to the prisoners' hair and eyelashes, their arms and legs. Cirilo tasted smoke in the rotten mangos they were forced to eat. Exhausted and starving, he fell asleep to the squeal of village pigs that were slaughtered nightly and left in their pens to rot. The American commander accused the villagers of being guerrilla supporters, which made it necessary to "depopulate" the islands.

Unrest plagued the camps. Men, driven by the hope of either being released or spared death, turned on each other, identifying alleged rebels, regardless of whether the accused were guilty or innocent. Those singled out were held down on the ground, arms pinned behind their heads or tied behind their backs, mouths pried open, beneath the running faucet of a large water tank. "Water cure," Cirilo called it. The American soldiers in cowboy hats shoved their rifle butts or their

boots into the prisoners' bloated stomachs for several minutes while a native interpreter repeated the Tagalog word "*kumpisal*" to the prisoner over and over again. They added the word "confess" in English for the Americans' sake. But many of the prisoners drowned.

The camps were overcrowded, allowing malaria, beriberi, and dengue fever to rage. American doctors treated the soldiers who fell ill, but they ignored the sick prisoners. Everyone in Purificación's family died of disease. Cirilo didn't know if anger or grief had kept him alive. He escaped with two prisoners one night, after smashing a patrolman's skull with his own bayonet. On his journey back to Ilocos Sur, he heard similar stories of detention camps and ruined villages. Some said the Americans were angry because the natives were ungrateful for their help in liberating them from Spain. Instead of welcoming them as heroes, the Americans complained, the natives were betraying them, using *bolos* to hack to pieces American soldiers who ventured beyond the towns they had pacified. The spears, darts, and stones the guerrillas used were as good as sticks compared to the American bayonets. They were being flushed out by the American soldiers like "quails in a shoot," one soldier bragged.

Cirilo met a man who had fled his hometown of Balangiga on the island of Samar. The American Navy fired on his village from their gunboats before they landed to invade. American soldiers, coming from the interior, joined the sailors in rounding up the townspeople and crowded them so tightly into pens that they slept standing up, leaning against one another, even in the rain. Another man who had escaped ruin in his hometown recited an order—like a drinking song—that had been handed down from an American general to all soldiers in the field: "Everything over ten" would not be spared. Cirilo didn't know what it meant until the man from Balangiga told him anyone over the age of ten would be slaughtered. They were things, not people, to the Americans. *Everything over ten.*

"This is your America," Fausto's lelang told him, and slumped against her bed's scarred wooden headboard.

"Things have changed." Fausto's voice faltered. "When I was in school—"

"Poor boy!" She sat up, spittle flecking her lips. "Those kind American women in those American schools were not teachers. They were soldiers, telling you what to do. How could I warn you then? Miss Arnold opened



up the world for you. Education is good. But they came here for a darker purpose.”

“Lelang, Miss Arnold is not evil.”

“You are not listening!” She shook her head, her gray hair fanning across her shoulders like a *mantilla*. “Like the Negroes who have been there for hundreds of years, you will never be accepted by the Americans. Why go there with this knowledge?”

The flame hissed as the melted wax pooled around the short wick. Her dark eyes were wet in the candlelight. “You think your father is ignorant. You believe American education made you smarter, but their schools erased our past, just as the Spaniards did.”

“Lelang, I am not ignorant.” Fausto got up from her bed, feeling weightless, unanchored. He held on to one of the thick, carved bedposts.

“I told this story only once before, to your father after your lelong passed away.” Her voice dropped so low he could barely hear her. “Until that time, Emiliano never knew why his own father was so untouchable.”

“I am sorry for your loss.” Fausto’s words and his whole body were stiff. He pulled down the mosquito net from the four posters of her bed until his grandmother was encased in white gauze. She seemed so far away from him as she blew out the candle.

“We must make use of the bad times,” she called out.

He unhooked the curtain from her bedroom entryway and let it fall in front of him. “It will make me stronger, Lelang,” he said. He waited to hear her voice again. In the moonlight, wisps of smoke rose and disappeared.

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Fausto breathed deeply, trying to recall the scent of betel juice and lime. “My father went to his rice fields without saying good-bye the day I left,” he said.

Arturo shook his head. “Damn, *hombrecito*. It’s never easy to leave your family. I’m sorry your dad made it harder.”

Fausto wanted to say more, but his throat was sucked dry. He sat mute as Arturo washed the dirty dishes in the bathroom sink. He nodded when Arturo fished his car keys from his pant pocket and announced that he would return in an hour. Arturo was going to bring back a folding cot so Fausto could talk into the night.

As the evening light began to fade, Fausto thought maybe he’d tell Arturo what happened the morning he came down for his final meal at

home. He wouldn't eat the freshly baked *pan* or the fried *bangus*, milkfish, his mother had made for him. He told her he'd seen his father leave before the sun rose. It meant he didn't care. His mother shook her head. Did he not remember the birth of each of his three sisters and brother? Of course, he did, but Fausto didn't want to admit how jealous he was at the sight of his father dancing and lifting each bundled baby to the sky. His father had always been hardest on Fausto, starting him in the rice fields at an earlier age than his siblings, giving him more chores. But his mother insisted that the joy his father displayed at the birth of his siblings was just a spark from the joy that had burst forth from him when Fausto was born.

"Your oldest brother died when he was a month old, and your brother after him died at childbirth." His mother brushed away tears near the mole below the corner of her left eye. "Your father thought we were cursed. The midwife could not help us, so we went to the *albularyo*, who held his hands on my stomach and said a prayer. We were scared, but we tried again. And then—after a difficult labor—you were born." Her voice grew stronger. "Your father called you his miracle. He told me he would stop working to watch you in the fields. You were growing up too fast for him, but he was thankful you were healthy."

Fausto pushed his slice of *pan* across the table. Why didn't his father tell him these things? He couldn't recall a time when his father was motionless in the fields.

"Do you remember the year we lost the rice crop to the typhoon—the year after we harvested only half the fields?" his mother pressed. "Do you remember the mestizo who owned the *nadumaduma* store near the plaza?"

Everybody lost their crops that year. Lim Juco, the Chinese mestizo agent, extended credit to Fausto's uncles and the rest of the families to survive until next year's harvest. He couldn't forget the agent's pale folds of fat on his belly, arms, and legs—or how he lived well off the townspeople. Fausto didn't like accompanying his father to the back of the tin-walled *nadumaduma* store where Lim Juco weighed the crops and bullied the farmers to accept his low rates. He didn't like the way his father answered to this man as if he were his master, though sometimes his father spoke up. During business dealings, the agent's lazy eye seemed to follow Fausto's every move. Jabbing his thick finger at Fausto, Lim Juco never failed to tell his father how lucky he was.

Fausto's mother broke her serving of *pan* in two and gave a piece to him. "The year we lost our crop, that mestizo told Emiliano he would give us credit for free," she said, chewing her piece of bread thoroughly as if it were all she had to eat. "He told Emiliano you were obedient and strong. He wanted you to work in his house."

Fausto knew of the arrangement. It was the first time he'd heard his father raise his voice with the agent. His father stormed out, gripping Fausto so hard his arm bore bruises when they reached home. Late-night arguments erupted between his parents, and then one evening his father returned from seeing the albulario and gave Fausto something to drink. Sitting before his mother that morning, he realized whatever he drank that night made him vomit the next day. Then he became feverish for days and feeble for weeks. As he lay in bed, he thought of the fields that needed to be cleared. His arms were too heavy for him to lift and yet were skinny as twigs.

Now he understood his father's behavior—sitting by his bed every evening until he recovered. In the glare of the kerosene lamp, his father turned over Fausto's arms and legs, examining him as a farmer inspects a sickly animal to determine its fate. Late nights, Fausto heard his father's muffled sobs in the corner where he kept vigil.

It was risky, his mother said, this powder Emiliano had given to Fausto to save him. But the albulario promised Emiliano the boy would recover without any lasting harm. Lim Juco withdrew his offer when he heard Fausto had lost nearly a quarter of his weight, and he blamed the boy's illness on Emiliano's insubordination, arguing over rates that he generously offered for worthless crops. It served him right, Jim Luco told the other farmers. The next year, when Emiliano paid off his debt with a bumper crop—Fausto was sure his father welcomed this as a sign that he had done the right thing—he worked with a different agent, one who offered even lower rates than Lim Juco.

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Fausto rocked back and forth in his bed, the creaking of the mattress coils keeping him rooted in the present. He had known about this story, but only now did he grasp what had happened. He checked the stopped clock out of habit, wishing for Arturo's return. He would tell the nurse that he had broken his father's heart, which hastened his father's death. Even as he felt the old wound in recounting his departure from home, even as he covered it up with fresh anger, Fausto could never fault his

father for not saying good-bye. Fausto was softening, with wisdom, with looking inward. No, it was old age, plain and simple, he decided, crossing his arms. Perhaps it was an early sign of a heart attack or stroke. Or maybe, he countered, the memories were loosening this closed-up muscle of his. He looked out the window into the square of blackness, past the vineyards and empty fields, the gaping unknown. Deep in the fist of his heart he knew why Rogelio was traveling a great distance to see him. Sons do that, he said aloud. They find their way back to their fathers.