

TWO

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About the Author

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THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE, I told my wife when she called an hour ago saying my twin sister had just died. Impossible, but here I am in the city morgue staring at her corpse, and oh, Aya, we both had mother's nose, father's brow, the same straight hair, but somehow on you it all looked better. The coroner asks me for identification twice before I respond, and I almost tell him what kind of a question is that? Whenever I look at Aya's mangled face I see beyond her wounds, I follow the contours as if they remained unblemished. Look at me, what other identification do you need? Then the man starts explaining to me how she died, traffic accident, just leapt in front of the cars out of nowhere, blinding rain, and the injuries begin to register one by one: Lacerations. Fractures. Broken bones. Bleeding organs. There was this wooden doll Aya once had, she was very fond of it before the dog had its way with it, limbs twisted all wrong, torso full of fang-sized holes. She put a sheet over it, and the splintered thing formed little tents with the cloth.

Are you sure you want to see the rest of her? he asks. It feels absurd to hide this body from me, so I brace myself and nod. It must be a trick of the mind, a little mercy: the first thing my eyes notice is her left hand, intact. It looks so slight and soft, with none of the stiffness I thought it would have. I have known those hands too well, and in our self-imposed exile into an aunt's closet we managed it, despite my own doubts: magic. Like those children in the pictures on our wall from when we were small, mute from across time.

The man starts talking again, but my ears will have none of it. He hands me a picture, a little creased and discolored but otherwise intact. A boy and a girl in their teens scowl from it, the former wearing a white barong, the latter a baro't saya, both clothes made of piña cloth: of course they'd scowl. The girl is seated on a rattan chair while the boy stands behind her, his right hand on her shoulder, her left hand reaching up to touch him. Like husband and wife. Who posed us this way? Was it Aya? Flipping it over, I see our names scribbled on the back. Alan and Aya Salas, 13th. At first this confuses me, wondering if the number meant our age in the photo, then I remember what it meant. Thirteenth pair of twins born to our family. Our mother and her sister were the twelfth. What do these numbers matter to me now?

I sit down and take Aya's hand in both of mine; she had known hard work, many years of it, maybe without someone to help her. Much rougher than when I last held it. I try to pry it open to lace my fingers with hers as we once had done, find that I can't. So I ask for some time alone with her, then close my eyes. Hello, Aya. We are hiding from our voices.

Tita Mabel's face swims into view. Let me tell you about the first twins, she says, as she peels a dalandan, digging her nails into its thick, green skin. She likes them sour. Maybe that's why she frowns all the time, I told Aya once. No ounce of sweetness in that body. Yet when, once, I saw Mother peeling a ponkan, she did it the exact same way her twin did. How could they have turned out so different?

Though Mabel probably asked that question, too, when our father came into the picture.

Listen! Tita's voice thunders, and like a spurred horse my mind gets to work.

Mabel calls them Jose and Jose. I think it's because their real names have been lost to time already, and this is the best her rigid mind can come up with. But maybe it is this frankness that makes them come alive in my young mind.

I see their mother, heavy with them, left for dead in a forest, accused of witchcraft. I see her strain, alone, as she gives birth to them and dies. Her cries pierce through the thick blanket of insect chirping, disturbing the animals, and something else. I see the mangkukulam emerge from their conclave, see the weeping babies at their dead mother's breast. They take them in, nurse them, raise them, in silence.

They were feared and shunned, you see, says Mabel, so they hid. Away from the gossip, the angry cries, the accusations. It was quiet in the forest, even when the animals made noise, it was like music. Imagine that.

Imagine, I do. The young boy that I am, I see them living like Tarzan and the apes, swinging from tree to tree in loincloths, going home to nipa hut treehouses. It raises so many questions, though: how do they go to the bathroom? Do they do it while climbing the trees, do they go down to the ground and dig a hole like our grandpa used to do?

Alan, be serious, Aya scolds me, and I stick my tongue out at her.

Serious it is, then. Not twin Tarzans, but two young men, appear before my eyes. They are mute, Tita says to me. Because they don't need to speak. They can smell a storm brewing two pueblos away. Ears grown sensitive to every pulse, quiver, and rustle can hear the coming of rainbirds and locust swarms. Sometimes their moods even answer to the weather. Or is that the other way around?

What secrets their adoptive parents must impart upon them. In the isolation, they learn how to be attuned to what is around them. But most importantly, they learn how to be attuned to one another.

Mother's face replaces Mabel's. Don't you tell them how that story ends, she says to her sister, barging in just as Titatells us how Jose and Jose decide to leave their forest and little barrio. Mabel honors this request for a while. She tells us after a week.

Lightning and thunder startle me out of my thoughts, or perhaps complement them. No rain falls though. My wife might have been calling me while I was in the morgue, but I had shut off my phone. I wandered around for a bit until that bit turned into a couple of hours. My feet hurt; I have been walking in circles around the block, it seems. When I opened my phone I get three messages from her, first asking how I am, then where I am, then telling me the chicken will be cold by the time I get home.

This morning I didn't feel anything odd at first. Left the house before the wife woke up, got stuck in traffic, accident ahead apparently, didn't pay it much attention.

Reached the office, started working on this ad showing me a heavily made-up woman. I stared at that photograph for a whole minute, realizing that I felt none of the excitement I used to have whenever I see these seductresses with big bold letters, loud colors, clever catchphrase on a billboard or a magazine. Noise to the eyes it seemed to me now, all surface, no depth.

A coworker tapped me on the shoulder, crooking a finger and tilting his monitor my way.

Yeah?

You sent me these pictures yesterday, right?

Right. So?

He pointed at the whole folder. Did you mean to attach these, too?

I tried not to frown, wondering what he was getting at. Then I squinted at my pictures and saw that, instead of the two models posing as a couple, they were filled with the empty spaces between them, the gaps between hands and shoulders. What few pictures of their faces I had taken were out of focus. I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Please tell me there were more.

Yeah. You had a whole other folder of decent pictures, but it was just weird that you'd send me these. What, were you trying to be poetic or something? he chuckled.

I pushed myself away from his desk and rubbed my eyes. Don't worry about it, he said. We have off days.

I smiled and shrugged. It was all so dizzying. Taking product shots, posing models, doubling as copywriter because one of them had been sick for days. It wouldn't stop when work finished late: I had to see them plastered on newspapers, magazines, tarpaulins on my commute home, leering at me. Everywhere I turned, everything made its own sound, wanted to be heard, tried not to drown in the cacophony. I'm here, I'm here, I, I, I. And when I went through the door, the silence was no better. Tina walking about barefoot, reheating dinner for me. Sometimes I would eat alone, then stumble, tired, into our bedroom, and lie beside Tina, who was fast asleep, our backs turned to one another. No, it wasn't an off day.

Spent the rest of the day hunched over my desk. If I kept this up I would turn into a gargoyle. Some other guy asked me what the weather forecast was for today, and I paused, then chuckled and told him maybe a tikbalang's going to get married later. Ticked me off a bit when he laughed and called me superstitious, then, just like that, thunder like gods bowling upstairs, followed by rain, like the gods got tired of their game and decided to pour buckets of water down on us instead, and all the while the sun refused to be ignored. Huh, imagine that, I said, as my palms started to itch like crazy, like when I tried to climb a bougainvillea to reach my kite, and little red pinpricks formed on my palms, blooming blood; Aya had to hold my hands under the faucet for me, I was such a crybaby. My colleague laughed and said, Our own weather channel, eh, Alan?

We were, you know, I say to my wife, Tina, before realizing I have drifted off in the middle of dinner.

Were what? Tina replies, setting my plate down in front of me with a clatter. You know, she continues, you never told me that sister of yours was your twin.

Oh?

I look up from my plate, surprised at how much I have withheld after all this time; I pull out our picture from my pocket and hand it to her, resting my chin on my fist. Tina has changed into her house clothes but she still has makeup on, and her hair is still tied into a now-disheveled bun. Her frown dissolves into a smile as she examines the photograph. I'd love to wipe that lipstick off her lips. It has been so long since we were last together.

I ask, Want me to wash the dishes tonight?

Her smile disappears, and her brow furrows. If you're too tired you don't have to, she answers, and we eat our dinner quietly.

Afterwards, I turn on the television and watch the news. We were little weather channels, Aya and I, and so were our mother Maya and her sister Mabel before Mother had us, and so it went for the eleven others before us.

We lived in a small town that, despite best efforts to the contrary, was already, inevitably, unsheltered from the rest of the world. I wish I can say that magic took place in it everyday, that Time, even for a little while, changed course, slowed, flowed through a different channel in that place, but that wasn't the case. One pockmarked but nevertheless oft-used road connected it to other municipalities. We had telephones, post, a small clinic, sari-sari stores, a chapel, along with most other amenities that one would find in a typical baranggay. Every home had a television, though not all of them were working, and radios made up for that. We had to go to the next baranggay to attend a public school, but it wasn't too far away, and it was decently furnished—at least we knew what a computer was. I made it a point to elaborate on this whenever someone teased me about coming from a backward province. Flimsy defense, as I had once thought how slow everything seemed in that town, how I couldn't wait for something, anything, to happen.

It was hemmed in on one side by a thicket, a humble one, populated by acacias, and farmland on the other. The older neighbors loved to say how it was all forest, once. Hard to imagine, given how small the thicket was; you could walk it from end to end in less than an hour. Aya and I tried it, pretending that we were the First Twins. Our house was closest to the thicket, and people for the longest time would claim to see and hear things there. Tita Mabel was always on the lookout for trespassers until, finally, she was able to catch two teenagers fooling around in our backyard. Someone had attested to seeing a many-limbed shadow diving behind the santan bushes. Mabel scoffed. Not the first time, she said. The thicket was almost gone before I graduated from high school.

For all its contact with modernity, however, the town boasted one oddity: us. Why don't you sing us a little song? a neighbor would ask, and we would, we'd dance even, proper little children, waiting for the inevitable next question, What weather will we be having today? Before we discovered our own magic, we had made a game of it, telling them wild forecasts, sometimes making guesses that contradicted each other so that either way we'd be correct, and an hour or so after the relative's visit we'd get a call saying why yes the sun came out just a few moments after that burst of rain, and would you kindly thank the children for us?

I sob in front of the television as the weatherman warns us of possible rain-showers tomorrow.

What do I remember of Aya? I had not seen her in a few years. I wish I could be certain she hadn't changed at all. A few weeks ago I got a letter from her that said she would be seeing me soon, but she never came, so I thought she still didn't want to visit. We had talked only two times after I moved out. Both times were short, never sweet.

We had a fight before I left the province to live with our father here in the city. I told her I'd burn that wall down myself, the wall full of pictures of the other twins, all the superstitious nonsense, and she could go and join them if she wanted. That wall was covered with framed pictures of the house's previous occupants, identical twins all, posing side by side as if exact reproductions of one another, wearing the same kinds of clothes that we did in our own photograph. They stared vacantly into the camera, into our eyes, as if looking for something else in them.

I couldn't wait to leave; I had already told Tina that I would be closer to her soon, and I held on to the hope that Aya would stop her hysterics and come make a life for herself there, too.

And I'd love for you to meet my sister, I said to Tina, oh you'll see, it's a surprise.

But Father didn't have the heart to force Aya to come with us, said there was too much of Mother in her. I wanted to say I had as much of Mother in me as she did. That was probably the noisiest that house had ever been, with all our shouting; Tita Mabel wouldn't have been pleased with that.

As we drove away, my eyes were trained on the rear-view mirror, a sick feeling in my stomach, like something tugging at my insides was stretched taut, then snapped.

Tita told us that she remembered her birth clearly, as did all the other twins in the family. And what do you remember? she asked us. We remember crying, we'd both answer. We thought it would always be that way: from the day of birth, one cry amplified. The sound had stayed with us, even if the rest of that moment hadn't.

And what else? Mabel continued, and I would squirm under her gaze. Every week the same question, as if it was a test that I failed every time. Every week Aya and I gave the same answers: that body across from one's own in the crib. That body, the first person we saw upon opening our eyes to the world. How the hairs on our arms

rose as if longing to greet that entity nearby, as if our very skin acknowledged the other's presence. Mabel would nod as she listened, lips parted into a sliver, waiting. When we ran out of things to say all that would escape from those lips was a sigh, gesturing for us to take our siesta.

She had always made me feel uncomfortable. The first day we met her, we were only little children. Mother and Father, before heading for the city to spend some time together, would leave us with her. She sat on one end of a long table, we on the other. I was the first to speak; I said Good morning po, to which she just nodded before pressing a finger to her lips. Already, I told Aya afterward when we were in our room, I felt like I'd done something wrong.

But you have done something wrong, Aya says, frowning. Look. You're all red and shaking. Why are you shaking?

I'm not!

See? I can't tell what you're thinking anymore. What happened to you?

Aya disappears as the sun shines in my face. Tina is still home. Takes me a few moments to get used to it. Asked for a few days off from work yesterday. She must've done the same. The aroma of coffee fills the room; recognition jolts me awake and I sit up.

You're too old for the couch, she quips.

I don't know whether to smile or not; it feels like ages since she last made a joke, so I shrug.

Not going to work? I ask, getting up to pour myself some coffee.

She exhales and the air hisses out of her mouth. Obviously, dear, she replies.

Oh, okay.

I drink my coffee then wash my mug, pretending I don't notice her sideward glance at it, then plan the tasks for the day. My Tina. It had been an awkward courtship for me, when I'd never talked to any other woman as much as I had my sister.

Whereas Aya had loved pale hues, Tina was all about vibrant color. Royal blues on the bed, white-gold curtains when I stepped into her room on our first night together. And when she removed her uniform, purple on perfect olive-brown skin. I fumbled quickly with my own clothes, but when she stepped closer, her fingers flying over my buttons, my belt, god, I didn't know what to do with myself. You've never done this before? she asked, her eyebrow raised in amusement.

Tina, I told her, I don't know what to do with you, and she laughed in my face. She took the lead, told me what needed to be done, coaxed my body to move with hers. She drew me close and taught me what to tell her, what to whisper in her ear, how to make her tremble. I didn't think it was possible, to fit into another body the way I did with Tina. That it was as easy as that. No guesswork.

Why do you touch me like that? she asked afterward, laying sideways next to me, one leg draped over mine.

Like what?

Like you're afraid to break me.

I'm certain that I didn't answer her then. Aya and I had learned how important a touch was, but these, oh these that Tina showed me, they were something else.

Has the glamour worn off? We haven't been married for very long but something feels stale in the air between us. Is it my long hours? Sometimes I lie awake, afraid that we said all that we could say about ourselves, about our lives, at the beginning, and in the silence of our bedroom I hear nothing else but my own thudding heartbeat when I press my ear to my pillow. I have done the same things she asked of me, followed her cues, but I'm still lost.

Alan, Tina says.

Yes?

We should be discussing what to do with the remains. Do you know where she wanted to be buried?

I—don't know.

You don't know. Tina's voice drops with her shoulders. I've heard that voice often enough. Talking to her now is like chewing broken glass. When did our conversations turn into landmines?

As usual, I don't know what to say; how could I know what Aya wanted? And anyway, even if I had denied the possibility back then, I thought, deep down, neither of us would be around to make arrangements for the other.

Every voice over the phone I had called responded with surprise when they heard my voice. It took a long while. I don't know whether it was because I really did have that hard a time tracking down relatives and old friends from our home town, or because of reluctance. It was like the same phone call, repeated several times. Each time it felt like news to me, too, as if I was telling as many people as I could to convince myself of the truth of it.

Things are a blur after that, and it doesn't take long before I find myself at the funeral home, looking at a closed casket. There. As blunt a picture of finality as one can get. Though, coming from my line of work, I should be used to it. The first few relatives trickle in, bringing food with them.

I ask about her, how she was before she left to find me, and they stare at me the way I had stared at the coroner. I shrug. I only want to know if anything unnatural happened, I add. Plagues of toads or rats or that kind of thing. They then nod, remembering what happened between my mother and aunt, and they retell that story wistfully.

What am I supposed to say? What I know of Aya's life after I left her I had to learn from others. That she stayed holed up at home most of the time. That she worked menial jobs for our relatives, making just enough and seemingly satisfied

with it. That she had taken to wandering the forest, or what was left of it, perhaps hoping to find the fabled home of the First Twins. After that, nothing for months. Then, somebody brought me the news that she may have taken a lover, a newcomer. Relief flooded me, like releasing breath I didn't know I had held. I remember saying I was happy for her. It felt like absolution. I didn't bother to confirm it.

After a bit more catching up, I excuse myself, telling them I have forgotten to bring juice.

The same doom befell all the twins in the family, inevitably. One pair drowned in a flood. Another in an earthquake. And, of course, Jose and Jose, born during the Spanish occupation. Young men, martyred side by side by a firing squad. They had left the forest, you see, to fight for their country, Tita said. They forsook the love of a young barrio witch, saying nothing should part them. So she made sure they would keep that promise, and every twin born of this family thereafter.

She told us these tales with relish. At night I could see Aya struggle to stay awake, and I'd hear her whimper in her sleep. What death had she envisioned for the both of us?

Well, boy, maybe if you had been born identical you would've known by now, would be Tita Mabel's answer. Over time we had gotten used to how she spoke to us. Like grunting out every sentence. Flat tones. It had been her way, she couldn't be blamed. We weren't born with the kind of magic she had expected from us. We tried, of course. Just like the Wonder Twins, alright? I'd say to her. We'd touch the tips of our index fingers and list off all the magic words we've learned from the television. We would forfeit merienda for a quiet moment trying to read each other's thoughts without speaking, being one and the same person. We thought our heads would burst. Do you hear anything? Aya asked.

Am I supposed to hear 'I like ice candy'?

Alan!

Oh. Then no, not really.

D'you think there's something wrong with us? Aya asked, keeping her voice low.

I replied, You heard what Tita said. There's no ounce of real magic in our blood. That's why she's that way with Mother.

That's not true.

Maybe. I don't know.

Want to try again?

I shrugged. Just what were you thinking of, anyway?

Aya blushed.

How did they do it, those others before us? How often had they in turn spent time looking at this wall of identical poses, identical stares, identical children, as I had done? The photograph that hung next to ours was of mother and Tita. Now those two, our relatives would tell us, they were the best. Perfect mirrors of each

other, at least before you two came along. From a distance, one would not be able to tell which girl was which in their picture. The only thing that shattered this illusion is a close inspection; our mother's eyes weren't looking directly at the camera. A negligible distance to normal eyes, but for Tita Mabel it was a world of a leap. It was your father's fault, I heard her mutter, only once, He spoiled the picture. I'd joke about it with Aya once we were out of earshot. Maybe Tita Mabel liked our father, too, I'd say in mock-seriousness, maybe she was jealous! Aya would laugh a bit, then fall silent.

We were the first fraternal twins this clan had seen. Our mother recalled how the crowd managed to fit into the room despite the midwife's protests. She had mused aloud a few times about how that little town managed to cling to such traditions, though she herself still adhered to them.

Aya came out first. Always the eager one. When I followed a half-hour later, everyone wanted to hold me to make sure. Maybe Maya ate something funny, maybe the father's blood was strong and virile, but of course it's strong and virile he got her pregnant out of wedlock, didn't he, and what does Mabel have to say about this?

She wasn't there, apparently. She couldn't be in the same room with her sister anymore. What started out as a few feet grew into several meters until, finally, one of them had to move out of the house. Whenever mother tried spending time with her the rice always got burnt, the piles of dry leaves in the yard burst into flames, the neighborhood children hurt themselves on the street just outside their gate and all manner of accidents occurred.

Our father did not marry our mother, but he would spend half of the week with her. He offered to take us all with him, to be a real family, once he had enough money to sustain us in the city, but for some reason she refused. Mabel chose to move out, while Mother kept their ancestral home. I'd always wanted to ask why mother left us with our aunt every Saturday whenever our father took her to the city.

Maybe it's a penance, Aya answered, once, when I called her a month after my move, before she put down the phone.

When one wasn't born magic, one learned to cope. There was a closet in Aunt Mabel's house, the only piece of furniture she took from her ancestral home. Mother let her have it gladly, but Tita never thanked her for it still.

The home of the First is gone now, so this closet was where we got our magic from, Tita would tell us. Its wood was carved from one of the oldest trees. Whenever we grew apart, when we couldn't understand each other, we retreated here, and we could listen properly again.

Took us a while to figure it out, but it did help. After weeks and weeks at it we'd know what the other had been through, what we were feeling at a particular moment,

without opening our mouths, even how the other one's day went whenever we spent it apart. We learned to keep the silences mother's house had grown accustomed to.

We felt, and we listened: Aya squealed in delight upon getting the wooden doll from our father, choked up when the dog destroyed it. I shivered, biting my lip, when mother caught and punished me for trying to kill that dog with a slingshot. One day we decided without even consulting one another to both fake a fever to skip school, because, see, living so close together, sure we both would get a fever. Had a lot of laughs over that one, until Tita Mabel told on us.

After this, we didn't even need Tita; we would seek out the quiet by ourselves. Whenever possible, we didn't use the appliances in our house. Especially the electric fan. Noisy as all hell. I just walked around in my shorts bare-chested, while Aya wore a chemise she was just about to outgrow at the time. She always finished her homework before I did, so afterwards she would lie down on my lap while I read my textbooks. If any talk went around, we didn't know about it, but I think everyone was aware of an unspoken complicity not to find this any more unusual than the other twelve twins before us. They did benefit from it, after all. Who needed the weatherman when we were around?

I still know how she felt like, her forehead beneath my hand, the way my thumb caressed the bridge of her nose.

We arranged for Aya's wake to last for three days. Tina was put-off at this seeming lack of feeling on my part, given the fact that most of our relatives and family friends were having difficulty travelling from the province.

Tina asks me to identify who these family members are in between carrying a tray of food to offer the mourners. I break off now and then to greet newcomers.

And those two over there? she whispers.

I give them a quick glance. Cousins, mother's side, I reply. There were a handful from Dad's side yesterday.

More from your mother's side.

The constant stream of chatter falls into a hush whenever I move about from one group of relatives to another. Tina must've noticed.

They don't seem very friendly with you.

It's not that, really. I'm used to it.

Doesn't it bother you? she asks. And why do they keep asking you about the weather?

I can't help but grin.

We are alone now, and it feels like the first break we've had in days. I had been helping her wash the plates after the last of the mourners for the day went home. After wiping her hands with a dishtowel, she goes off to get ready for bed.

Tin?

Hm?

Thank you.

There it is, she can't help it: she breaks into a smile, flash of white before disappearing into our room.

Alan, I think I've figured out a way, you know.

My last conversation with Aya began this way. I called her, she picked up the phone, but before I could even greet her she told me that.

Aya, you're losing your mind...God, I swear I didn't mean to say it out loud. I heard no retort. I put down the phone before the dead air could drive me mad, but the silence followed me around for the rest of the day. So I said it over and over in my head, my last words to her: you're losing your mind, you're losing your mind, you're lost...

I hadn't clung to our town the way Aya did, and my restlessness grew as I did. I longed for school, because it meant travelling to the neighboring town. I begged Mother to take Father's offer. I asked for another room, as I had been sleeping beside Aya still. Losing patience once, during high school, I yelled at her. You're at Tita's beck and call, I said. Why does she have so much power over you?

It's not power, Al, she said quietly. And it's not that simple. You should know that.

I'm too old for games, Ma.

Where was Aya when this fight happened? I must have yelled at her, too, when she followed me around during lunchbreak. I was so torn up by guilt later that night that I returned to our old room and never left it until moving out.

I can't remember when exactly I started to fear the quiet that used to be so familiar to us. Must've had something to do with our first visits to the city where Father lived. We were in our early teens. It had been a graduation gift for finishing grade school. On the bus, Dad would point out ahead the gigantic pictures of men and women, looking as if they were watching over the road, like glossy gods. I gaped at these, transfixed. Is that what you do here? Do you take photos of them? I asked him, I needled him with questions. Aya tapped my arm. Scowling, I stopped squirming. She was never happy with this fascination, with the entire visits, actually. The noises from the street alone were enough to put her in a bad mood. Shut it out, it's bad for us, she would admonish, but I wasn't sure what she meant by this. When I asked, she would get angrier. You never had to ask before, Alan, she'd say. Eventually, only I would accompany father back to the city, spending more and more time away. He helped me get into a good college and, later, after I finished my studies, he helped me get into an ad agency.

I was pulled in by the allure of charming a passer-by with a pretty picture, or a few choice words, even a catchy jingle. The magic of persuasion. Frank declarations, no dancing around. Coming back from that visit, I would watch TV, turn on the radio, listen to and watch not just the news or the programs but the commercials as well. All that lovely, noisy chatter filled my ears.

And I met my future wife during those days. We'd make love until we were completely spent, be late for work, have dinner outside. She overwhelmed me, and I was happily exhausted. Couldn't stop being with her, couldn't stop talking, no time for silence, and she'd always fall asleep first. She hated waiting around.

I still made the long, three-hour commute back home every other day. Aya would then greet me with a frown when I arrived.

Her eyes scolded me every time, scanning me from head to foot. We turned each other inside-out in our younger years, but you couldn't read me this time, could you? I couldn't either, back then. I didn't know what to make of it. I didn't know what to tell you.

I made excuses: It was raining where I came from. I'm cold. I shiver when I'm cold. What more do you want to know?

She grabbed my arm, then felt my neck with the back of her hand, scowling all the while.

You're burning up, she said, but that's no fever. I'd know if it was a fever.

She was right. I was very warm. And in her eyes I saw Tita Mabel's fury, or what could've been her indignation, finding out her sister Maya was pregnant with us.

Once upon a time the twelfth pair of twins, Maya and Mabel, fourteen at the time, posed for a picture, as the eleven before them had done, and like the eleven they were gifted. They knew the weather like they knew the lines on each other's palms and how their thoughts were strung together without needing to speak. They were as silent as the photographs of their predecessors. Before them stood the aging photographer, scolding his son. The old man had seen to the portraits of the previous twins and had brought along the younger man for the first time. The boy was staring at both girls, and Maya had expected the same look everyone else in the town gave them. Wonder, a hint of reverence, some underlying current of fear, maybe.

The kind of curiosity in his gaze, however, darted from his eyes like hooks, yanking Maya out of what seemed like a stupor: beside her, Mabel, waiting for the photographer to finish, and here she was, right here, a whole body. Separate.

Mabel saw the change in her, and she grabbed Maya's hand, but it was too late. She had to let go, else she'd feel that creeping tendril crawl into her skin, infecting her, too. From that day forward, Maya was severed from Mabel.

Or at least that was how Tita Mabel told it. When Aya asked Mother about it, she said she imagined not a hook or a tendril but a lamp newly-lit. Aya did not understand.

Nor did Mabel, Mother added. When I met Tina, I remembered this story and I knew exactly what Mother meant. I knew, then, too, what she was talking about, that day when I picked a fight with her. Something twisted in my stomach, like a chord pulling at my insides, getting stretched taut.

I try picturing Aya crossing that street, photograph in hand, tightly clenched. I try understanding how it feels like to hurtle into ruin. Did she throw her hands out in a futile gesture? No, couldn't have. She must have noticed the coming rain. Imagine that, right again. On days when a tikbalang would wed, we'd run outside, never mind if we got a scolding later, get drenched, drink in the rain. She must have looked up and drunk in the rain.

We had learned to divide how we knew our world: in our heads there were things clear and nameable or trapped in certain dates and times, but the rest of it we found was in our skin; what we couldn't quite put a finger on, or what the tip of the tongue couldn't manage to say, escaped into our pores. When we stayed in the closet, the dark felt warm and round, an unseen cave made of blankets. Aya's fingers, puzzle pieces that fit into the spaces between mine. Silence, save for our breath and the rustling of clothes with every movement. We were hiding from our voices.

It scared us the first few times, and we did not manage to stay any longer than a few minutes. Magic was supposed to feel good, supposed to be all brightness and music and sweetness which the closet did not have. Too loud, Tita Mabel would always tell us whenever we played inside the house and got too rowdy, and we figured that, maybe, magic feared the sounds the mouth made, daggers that sliced through the air and drove away the souls that came before.

Words are tricky, Tita said. But your body never lies. And when God sends you a body that mirrors yours, what do you think it's for?

She must have cradled this photograph close to her breast and waited. Alan, I think I've figured out a way, she said to me...

True enough, our mother and Tita Mabel had perished together, when we were fourteen years old. Tita called one day, asking for her sister. Mother was outside, but the moment she heard the first ring she sprinted to answer it. As they talked, it was as if the last decade had never happened, and it was then that rain began to drench the newly-laundered clothes she had just hung. She didn't tell Tita, who would've taken that as a sign to hang up before some other, more catastrophic disaster happened to her twin's garments. They agreed to meet; the next day, we heard of a restaurant burning down, all its patrons along with it, twin sisters included.

Both of them at once? Tina asks. We lie in bed. We haven't done this in a long time. She is looking at the ceiling, I at the clock. I purse my lips.

Yeah. Aya never forgot.

Didn't you?

I try not to remember. I face my wife. Her eyes are half-closed. It's one in the morning. Her chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm. Haltingly, I reach under her shirt.

Alan, I'm tired, I can't—

I won't. Just. Ssh. My palm rests first between her breasts, then moves down to her belly. I feel a giggle welling up from inside her. What?

Tickles a bit.

D'you want me to stop?

No, no, wait. Tina looks at me this time as she keeps my hand in place. Pressed against her body, I feel a familiar sensation. A flutter of excitement, an undercurrent of contentment, making itself known in a tremble. Tender, rippling from under her warm skin. She told me the last time I touched her like this, it was as if I was afraid to break her. I couldn't tell her that I had touched another this way, that I had mapped out another body with my palm, my fingers, my skin, had done it so well that I could read her heartbeat, could hear it pounding in my ear when things went quiet.

We stay this way until we both fall asleep, facing each other, like mirrors.

We are laying Aya to rest. She probably wouldn't mind this, even if the cemetery is far from our old home; it is close to me, at least. Going there alone, where she knows I cannot follow. Anyway, she'd probably be angry if I did, after all the trouble she went through ensuring my survival, that I survive her death.

I feel Tina's hand clasp mine. I can't look at her; I just keep on staring at the trees, the sky, anything above me as I feel my throat burning. Her fingers feel warm, her grip firm; her skin bears the calluses from housework, and here she is holding me up, offering me her strength despite all the long nights. I have to unlearn what I know about your body and start over, my Christina.

Saw that name first on a pin on a blouse worn by a pretty pharmacist. My tongue felt like cement, so I just pushed the prescription note towards her. Saw her mouth twitch, hiding a smile. I wondered what it would look like without lipstick. When I forgot my change she grabbed my hand and gave me the coins, and I could almost swear her touch burned itself onto my wrist, and it never healed since, my Tina.

The priest asks me if I want to say a few words, say goodbye. Tina slips her hand out of mine to gently urge me forward. I stayed up all night scribbling some sentences down on a piece of paper, which I ended up leaving behind in the car. I place my hand on the coffin; far off, thunder rumbles. I wait for the rain to fall, first as echoes, then as golden showers lit up by the afternoon sun. I smile at the priest and walk back to my seat. Beautiful weather we're having today.