

You Think You Know

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Bad, bad night. Nothing worse than opening your door to a crying girl. Joanna wasn't even weeping gracefully like some of those women you see on TV, with trembling lips and slow, slow tears that slide down perfect cheeks. She was bawling, swollen-eyes-and-hiccups crying, no point trying to understand what she was saying. I let her in, and we sat down on a bench. Boxing gyms don't come equipped with couches.

"Sorry," she said after a while. She looked a mess, her hair falling all over her face.

I waited for more, but she seemed busy enough just holding back tears.

"It's okay," I said. "It's not like I was doing anything important."

She smiled. It was past 2 a.m., and everybody else was asleep. She'd called my cellphone twice before I finally woke up. I had been dreaming about something, I don't remember what, and when I saw her name on the screen I thought I was still dreaming.

Joanna dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. I wished so much I had something to offer her.

"It's my parents," she said. "They won't let me go to Germany."

"Ah," I said, like an idiot.

"It's too dangerous *daw*, too far away, etc. They think I'm still a child."

"What did you say?"

"I'm old enough, blah blah blah. I said everyone else's parents had already said yes."

"And?"

"*Wala*. It's either Singapore or nothing."

She sounded completely deflated. I knew she'd been dead set on Germany since she found out about the exchange program. Over the last months she

had worked hard to improve her grades to qualify, and had even started learning the language. Last week she told me she was almost ready to tell her parents. Just a little more research, she said, before she presented her case.

“What will you do?” I asked.

“I don’t know yet. Part of me thinks Singapore isn’t so bad, while another part wants to quit altogether, just out of resentment.”

“But in that case,” I ventured, “the only one who loses is you.”

“I know. But I’m angry.”

She offered me another smile. I wanted to put my arms around her and tell her it’s going to be all right. Instead I said, “Are you hungry? We could go grab a bite.”

“No. Can I sleep here tonight?”

I looked at her. There were five other men upstairs, piled up on bunk beds. We don’t have extra rooms, and the bathroom doesn’t get cleaned until morning. It’s against the rules too, though I didn’t really care about that.

“Please,” she said. “I’ve asked Meggie to tell my parents I’m at her place. But I’m too ashamed to tell her what happened. We had been looking forward to it so much.”

Those teary eyes tore through me. What could I do? I pulled out some of the less tattered mats and set them on the wooden floor. I gave her my blanket, my pillow. She’d brought a bag with almost nothing in it. She even forgot her toothbrush. I had to walk five blocks to the nearest 7-Eleven. Behind the cashier were rows and rows of cigarettes and condoms. I didn’t have enough cash for either.

“Just the toothbrush,” I said, in the lamest voice I’d heard myself use.

THE FIRST TIME Joanna walked into the gym, she got assigned a different trainer. Rotation, that’s how it works. Ideally everybody’s juggling the same number of students, though who ends up becoming a member and who never comes back, nobody can predict. It’s a good system in theory, but although we earn roughly the same it’s not exactly fair. Don, for example, has a longstanding deal with the cashier. In exchange for the prettiest girls, Don gives him a slightly bigger cut on the day’s sales and lets him sleep over sometimes, even though it’s really only supposed to be us.

Don has been here the longest and gets to do whatever he wants. The owner, a congressman’s wife, seems content to let him handle the business

and just collect the earnings at the end of the week. We barely even see her. I got a glimpse of her once, rolling up the car window, but that's it. She doesn't know that Don edits the figures and skims off a bit for our Saturday beer budget, and in all these years nobody has ratted us out.

Of course Don got Joanna. She'd come in with a friend, part of the usual influx of girls we get in early summer. (The number drops to less than half by the time school starts again.) They came about twice a week, and each time I secretly wished Don would pass them on to me. But he had no problem handling all the extra students. Then his father died and he went home to Palawan in early April. We didn't hear from him for a while, and he didn't come back until after Holy Week. By then I'd somehow become Joanna's trainer.

The way it usually works, whenever one of us goes on leave, is the cashier distributes his students temporarily among the others. Everything goes back to normal once the trainer returns. The only time this changes is if the student asks for a switch, or writes down somebody else's name on the logbook.

Vince, Joanna wrote the first day she came in after Don had returned.

I was surprised when the cashier called me over, though naturally I didn't say anything. At the time I thought it was a mistake, but I was afraid I might never get to talk to her again.

Later I saw Don behind the counter, flipping through the logbook. I expected him to confront me after she'd left and mentally prepared a number of excuses. But he never mentioned it. That's how I knew it really must've hurt him.

Joanna arrived alone that day. She'd been showing up by herself for some time when Don went home to Palawan. Her friend got too busy, or lazy, maybe both. Joanna wasn't sure either. She told me this a few weeks earlier, when I'd worked up the courage to ask. In the beginning we hardly talked. "Jab," "straight," and "upper" were almost the only words I used, and when I told her what to do between bouts I couldn't even look at her directly.

It was that bad. I couldn't get over myself, even though she seemed friendly enough—jokey in a self-deprecating way. She liked to complain at the end of each session, saying if I kept pushing her like that she might not come back. But she always did. That's one thing I came to really like about her. It was clear she'd never been good at sports—she had terrible coordination—but she persisted. You should've seen her at the speed ball back when she was still with Don. I used to sneak peeks at her, and it pained me to see her struggling so.

I wanted to take her wrists and guide her through the rhythms—now right, now left, at first slow, then faster and faster.

It was she who finally got us talking. “Have you been here long?” she asked me mid-bout.

“What?” I said, even though I’d heard her fine. It was maybe our third or fourth session. I was so anxious that I lost track of her movements and almost got hit in the neck.

She repeated the question.

“Almost two years,” I answered.

“Ah.”

I held up the pads. Jab-straight, jab-straight.

“I came here from Tarlac,” I said. “Did a few odd jobs before a friend referred me here.”

“Tarlac? Where’s that?”

“Up north beside Zambales.”

“Why’d you leave?”

“To find a job, something to do.”

“Is there nothing to do in Tarlac?” She smiled. But I could tell she was getting tired because her punches were getting weaker.

“It’s different,” I said. “You don’t have as many options.”

We finished the round and sat on a bench. She was breathing heavily. She stretched her arms toward me, and I took off her gloves. It was early in the afternoon. I had no other students.

“Do you live around here?” I asked.

I had already guessed the answer. Most of our students are from the area, a residential district dotted with restaurants and schools. Joanna told me she lived only a couple of blocks away. Despite this, her parents forced her to take along a *yaya* whenever she came to the gym. She had argued at first, but realized it was easier to find another way. Now she just gave the maid a little money and sent her off to wander around or sit somewhere.

“She must be nearby, eating fish balls or something.”

She was still breathless, her cheeks flushed and her hair stuck to her neck in places. I had to force myself to stop looking.

Later, after Don had returned and we'd established that I'd be her trainer, conversation flowed more easily between me and Joanna. Once school started again, she dropped her visits to once a week on Saturdays. I'd expected her to quit by then, so although I saw her less often I was just glad she still came. For a long while I wanted to ask her why she picked me over Don, but I never did. I suppose I was afraid I might get disappointed, or maybe at some point it just didn't matter anymore.

THE MORNING AFTER she slept over, I found Joanna inside one of the boxing rings. She was lying on her side, her mouth open a little. She had moved the mats up there too, though I could see half her body had rolled off during sleep. I'd chosen the floor because the rings stank of sweat, but I guess at night it wasn't so bad. Anyway, she looked very peaceful. From where I was standing I couldn't see if her eyes were still swollen, so for a brief moment I could pretend that she'd come over not because of a fight, but because she wanted to see me.

It was just after 7 a.m. I hadn't wanted to get up yet, but I'd promised Joanna I'd wake her before the guys came downstairs. I walked toward the ring, unsure whether to get in or not. With her inside it seemed suddenly like trespassing. She lay in the center of the platform, surrounded by a perimeter of red and blue rope, far beyond my reach.

"Joanna," I whispered. "It's morning."

She stirred and said something, but remained horizontal.

"Joanna," I repeated, a little louder.

She peeked at me through half-open lids. "Huh?"

I'd assumed we'd have breakfast together, but as soon as she was up Joanna grabbed her bag and made for the door. There was a half-hearted attempt to collect the mats, but I told her I'd take care of it. I had the odd feeling that she regretted staying over, as if we had done something wrong.

"Don't tell anybody," she said before disappearing down the stairs.

I went back to sleep. Joseph, the cashier, woke me up after a few hours. "Hurry up," he said. "You've got students."

Later, after they'd left and I'd had something to eat, Yoyo came over and challenged me to a spar. He's big, bigger than me, with arms as thick as his legs and a flat, shaved head. He's about twenty-five, but looks much younger since he's always sporting a goofy grin. He's got some kind of autism.

Everybody loves him. His father drops him off every Saturday morning and he stays the whole day, hitting punching bags or lifting barbells, but Joseph never charges him extra.

I grabbed a pair of gloves and followed him into a ring. Yoyo smiles a lot and doesn't talk much, but we've learned to read his expressions. He put on his mouthguard and gestured for me to do the same. He even wore his headgear so I knew he meant business. Around us the other trainers gathered to watch. Several students, resting between sets, also turned their heads. Little tournaments like this aren't rare around here, but Yoyo always attracts an audience.

He took the offensive, landing a few good jabs. His punches were strong, but he left openings in his defense. "Your left!" somebody shouted. But I had already reversed the momentum. Soon I had him backed against a corner and was raining blows on his arms and abdomen. Like always, I pulled my punches and avoided his face.

Yoyo has been coming to the gym for years and has developed good instincts, but his best asset was still his endurance. I don't know how he understands pain, but even in situations like that, with his opponent at a clear advantage, he still manages to flash his trademark grin. I doubt he knows it, but that smile has an unnerving effect, daring you to go on punching him knowing it won't make a difference.

I stepped back to let him recover. He lay slumped against a post, his arms resting on the ropes. The other trainers egged him on.

"Get back out there!"

"That's it? You're tired already?"

Yoyo grinned at them.

By the time we finished, we were both out of breath and sweating down to our ankles. Yoyo hugged me and we sat at the edge of the ring, too tired to even pull off our gloves.

"That was good," I said.

He nodded. There was silence as we waited for our breathing to slow. Then he grinned at me and said, "That was good."

I've had many conversations like this with Yoyo. It's easy to see why people like him. There's a certain comfort in sitting beside somebody and knowing you don't have to say a thing.

“Vince!”

I turned around. Don was walking toward us, his shirt tied around his head and his chest gleaming with sweat. He likes doing this for the extra attention. Nobody dares to copy him, but the ploy does work. Joseph says he has a steady stream of women, mostly middle-aged, asking for him by name at the counter. Don keeps them coming back by flirting with them, but I know he calls them fatties behind their backs.

Yoyo stood and went over to the other guys. Don climbed into the ring.

“I saw Joanna here last night,” he said as he sat down.

“So?” I was worried he would report me, but I pretended like I didn’t care. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. Besides, if it came to that, between the two of us I figured he had more to lose.

“Nothing,” he said. “No money for a motel, huh?”

“What?”

“Do you want me to congratulate you?” He was grinning.

“It’s not what you think.”

“Bullshit. It’s not like we haven’t had any action here.”

I was tempted not to correct him, but then I thought of Joanna.

“I got up to pee,” he continued. “And there she was, like a prize inside the ring. Tell me, was it ... here?” He jerked a thumb toward the platform.

“Shut up, Don. She came here because she had a fight with her parents. I let her stay over because it was late. Nothing happened.”

“Oh? Too bad.”

I pulled off my gloves and wiped my neck with my shirt. I wanted to leave, but I was curious if he had anything more to say.

“How long have you been in love with her?”

“What? You’re joking.”

“Quit denying it,” he said. “It’s all over you.”

“What?” I said again.

“It’s obvious. But I don’t think she knows.”

“Good,” I replied before I could stop myself.

“You’re not telling her?”

“I haven’t thought about it,” I lied.

“Right. But I get it.”

“Get what?”

“Don’t pretend. You and Joanna, you’re different. You can’t just go up to her and say how you feel.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that.

“Believe me, I know.” Despite himself Don had moments like this, usually after having downed a few beers. “But you can’t let it eat at you. You’ve got to find somebody else.”

I shrugged. I knew he was right, but it felt weird taking advice from Don.

He started telling me about his friend Nadine. “Great girl, really laidback. Just got out of a relationship so doesn’t want anything serious.”

“Okay,” I said. He was looking at me expectantly. I wanted the conversation to end.

“I’ll give you her number. She’s been to the gym and she likes you.”

“Don—”

“I’m setting you up with Nadine and that’s that. Stop torturing yourself over someone you can’t have.”

I had heard those words before, but they still stung.

“Women,” he continued. “I’m not saying they’re replaceable, but even if you already love someone and spend time with somebody else, pretty soon you’ll forget about both of them and start looking for another. That’s just how it is.”

I already knew that’s what he thought. Every *inuman* I’ve had with him, there’s always a part where he tells us about his latest exploit, or at least his hunt for one. I’m sure he invents over half these stories, but I can’t say I don’t enjoy them. He’s an asshole, I know, but part of me envies him for not caring. Sometimes I even wonder why I can’t do the same.

NADINE TOOK ME to bed the day we met. I hadn’t slept with anyone in a while but did my best to seem confident. I used moves I’d relied on for years—biting the earlobes and twisting the nipples. I traced my fingertips up her legs, across her thighs and toward the center before slowly spreading her open. I was already lowering myself when she pushed me against the bed. She sat on

my stomach, then reached back to cradle my penis in the cup of one hand. I had never been under a woman before. It felt great, but so strange that at some point she had to ask me if I was ready to finish.

“Whew,” she said after we had separated.

I shifted a little so we could lie side by side on her bed. Our bodies were no longer touching. The wind from the electric fan felt cool against my skin.

“Was that good for you?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Tell me honestly. Because this is all I want.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I don’t want a relationship.”

“Don told me.”

She tilted her head toward me. Her hair looked deceptively longer, splayed against the pillow like that. “So?”

I wasn’t sure what she wanted me to say. “I understand,” I said.

“I don’t need you to understand. I just want you to accept that this is all it’s going to be. Got it?”

“Sure,” I replied. I liked her, but she was very confident for someone I’d just met. Did she really think I’d fall in love with her after one night?

“Great. Tell me again where you’re from?”

“Tarlac,” I said. “I was studying to be a seaman, but I dropped out in my last year. I realized I didn’t want to get stuck on a boat, and I had a friend who was going to Manila.”

Nadine sat up and lit a cigarette. She took a few puffs, then offered me her stick.

“I was born here, in Tondo. I suppose I haven’t moved around that much compared to you.”

We were at her tiny apartment just outside Ortigas, where she worked as a call center agent for a big telephone company. Don had told me nothing about her, so I was surprised when she walked up to me at Jollibee, wearing a collared blouse and a tight pencil skirt.

“Tondo to Ortigas is a pretty big leap,” I said.

“It takes a lot of luck. And a fake American accent.” She smiled. She was leaning against the headboard. The brown skin of her breasts shone in the dim light from outside.

At Jollibee we had been less comfortable. I had worn jeans and a fairly new shirt, and had even used some of Joseph’s cologne. I wasn’t nervous, but I wanted to make a good impression in case she said anything to Don. I was already there when she texted saying she’d be late. It was hot outside, so I ordered an ice cream and sat at a corner table. It was Friday evening and the place was packed, children everywhere. When I saw her walking toward me, her heels clicking on the tiles, I thought right away she wasn’t the girl for me.

Nadine was very pretty, much prettier than I’d expected. She had very black, very straight hair that falls to her chin, and full lips she likes to paint a deep red. She was small but she knew how to carry herself, the kind of girl you would remember. She sat down across from me and said, “Have you eaten?”

I said I hadn’t.

“Let’s order,” she said. “I’m starving.”

At the counter she paid for both our meals. I kept trying to pay her, but she refused. “I made you wait,” she insisted.

Nadine had this way of talking that immediately puts you at ease. When I first saw her I thought she looked high-maintenance, but she spoke so casually it was easy to forget she was wearing heels at Jollibee. “*Kumain ka na?*” she’d said when she arrived. Not “Hi, I’m Nadine,” not “Sorry, I’m late,” but “Have you eaten?” As we stood in line she told me about the horrible meeting she’d come from and her sudden, intense craving for tuna pie. We were halfway through the meal before she acknowledged we were strangers.

“I’ve been to the gym a couple times,” she said. “I used to see you training your students, or just watching TV.”

“You box too?”

“No,” she replied, laughing. “I hate exercising. I just go there sometimes to see Don.”

I picked at the chicken wing on my plate. I tried not to think of her as one of Don’s girls.

“I know him from a long time ago,” she continued. “You could say we grew up together, even though we only saw each other during the summer.

He has an aunt here, and he used to stay with her when school was out. He used to be very fat.”

“Really? Don?”

“The other kids used to call him ‘Batchoy’. Then we grew up and he kind of stretched out, got taller. Suddenly all the girls were after him.”

I smiled and said something. Inside I shelved this image of a fat Don.

After we’d finished eating, Nadine and I walked outside for a while. It had rained heavily but briefly. The wet asphalt shone under the headlights of passing cars. We looked for bars, but there were bands playing and all the tables were taken. She suggested we buy beer and go sit somewhere else. She said her apartment wasn’t far.

Afterward, when we were smoking in her bed, I asked her how she could afford to live by herself. I knew call center agents made money, but I also knew rent cost a fortune even in the outskirts of Ortigas.

“If I didn’t have my own place I’d still be living in Tondo,” she said. “When I was a child I lived with four siblings, both parents, and a really loud grandmother. If I had a roommate I could save more money, but I like having my own walls.”

She lit another cigarette. I sensed it was my turn to speak, but I didn’t have anything to say. The moment passed. Everything grew still except for the movement of our hands. Up, down, inhale, exhale. We blew the smoke upward, and the air turned round and round in the dark ceiling of the small room.

NADINE AND I saw each other regularly after that. We usually met during weekends, but sometimes she would text me on a Wednesday and if I had no more students I would take a shower and jump on the next bus to Ortigas. She never came to the gym, and I never asked her to. Honestly I was glad she never bothered. I had this stupid fear that her visit would coincide with Joanna’s, as if their occupying the same space would somehow expose my betrayal—and as if that even mattered to anyone.

Even with Nadine around I went on pining for Joanna. Not any differently, certainly not less intensely, but maybe just a bit less often. I felt nothing for Nadine, but being with her allowed me to forget the present and talk about other things. She asked me a lot of questions: what I liked about my job, how long I planned to stay, where I hoped to end up. It’s not that I’d

never had those thoughts before, but until then they hardly existed outside my head. At some level I was still coming to terms with having left my whole life behind in Tarlac. I was a long, long way from figuring out what's next.

Nadine was different. Almost every week she told me about variations in her life plan. Money was the key component. The long-term goal was to set aside enough for a house somewhere cheap but not too far away, like Rizal or Bulacan. But no matter how many times she calculated, she told me, her projected savings never amounted to anything close to what she needed. Sometimes she thought about giving up moving her family out of Tondo and just renting a studio apartment all her life. But she always backtracked. "I need to find a husband," she often said. "A man rich enough to marry."

It was incredible how quickly she got me to confess about Joanna. She claimed Don hadn't told her anything, but on one of our first evenings together she asked, very straightforwardly, "Who is she?" The tone of her voice implied a deep-seated certainty. I gave up trying to pretend.

I expected her to give me advice, as Don had, but she offered none. "I see," was all she said. I couldn't tell whether she felt hesitant or bored.

"*Yun lang?*" I was overcome by a sudden need for validation.

"It's a shitty situation," she said. "She's out of your league. What do you want me to say?"

Not that, I thought. But I kept silent.

Nadine became part of my routine more quickly than I'd expected. But the highlight of my week was still seeing Joanna. She didn't come in the first Saturday after she slept over, and for a week I worried that she would stop coming altogether. But the next weekend she arrived just as usual, with her big yellow jug and her gloves bouncing against one knee.

"Hi," she said brightly. "Many students today?"

She seemed completely recovered. She also seemed to have forgotten her dilemma. When I brought it up, she waved her hand dismissively and said, "Ugh, it's so embarrassing. I'm going to Singapore now."

"You're sure?"

"It's not what I wanted, but I realized—they're paying for it, so who am I to complain?"

The girl in front of me sounded very different from the one I'd let in two weeks before, but was more like the Joanna I knew.

“Anyway, I have some friends who are also going to Singapore. We’ve sorted it all out.”

She told me about the Marina Bay Sands, Universal Studios, how close the country was to Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam. At some point I stopped listening. I wondered, if I’d stayed in Tarlac and finished my marine engineering course, where would I be now? China? America? Farther?

“Come,” I said. “Boxing *na ulit*.”

Joanna stayed cheerful throughout the next weeks. As the date of her flight grew closer, it became almost impossible to talk to her about anything else. But one time we were leaning against the railing, looking down at the street below, and she said, “Look! *Santol*.”

There was a man passing right under us, pushing a cart filled with santol and buko.

“Isn’t santol sour? Why would anyone want to eat that?”

“The small ones are sour,” I said. “You have to wait for them to get bigger.”

“Like those?”

“You want some?”

I went down and bought two peeled ones, wrapped in separate plastic bags and sprinkled with salt. Joanna bit into the rind and exclaimed, “It’s sour!”

I smiled at her as I chewed. It was indeed sour.

“You lied!”

“The vendor lied,” I said. “Just bite through the rind. The pulp is sweeter.”

She looked down at the fruit suspiciously. I opened mine up and showed her the clusters of white flesh inside. I put one in my mouth.

“Like this,” I said. “Suck on it thoroughly, but don’t swallow the seeds.”

She did as instructed, but didn’t look like she was enjoying it. I’d forgotten that santol took some getting used to. I finished mine quickly and attended to two teenage boys who’d just come in. When I next approached Joanna, she had finished the rind and was down to the last bit of pulp. Earlier I thought she would throw the rest of the fruit away, and was glad she didn’t.

“O, how is it?”

“Blech,” she replied, some fruit still lodged in one cheek. “It’s not sweet at all.”

She opened the plastic bag and spit out the pulp-covered seed. She did this delicately, the seed slowly sliding out of her mouth before falling into the bag with the rest. She tied the plastic into a knot and launched it into the air, straight into the trash can. “Ready to go again?”

Like the other trainers I help my students stretch after sessions. It’s part of the job, and usually I go through the motions without even thinking. But with Joanna it was different. I simultaneously looked forward to and dreaded doing it. That afternoon we had santol, my hands were shaking so bad I had to throw a few punches to try to get them steady. She was already lying down, her arms at her sides and her face resting on a towel. “Hurry up,” she said, her voice muffled by the cloth. “I gotta go study.”

I knelt down and placed my hands on her calves, folding her legs backward until her heels touched her butt. Then I straightened her legs out and raised them as high as they could go, extending the whole lower body. When she was flat on the mat again, I stood over her, one foot on either side of her waist. She already had her arms stretched backward. I grabbed her hands, threw my weight behind me, and swung her upper torso from side to side. I lowered her gently, my thumbs still hooked against hers. She placed her hands on her nape and I swung her again, this time holding on to her elbows.

“Don’t press down too hard,” she said as I bent forward to give her a massage. “My back hurts.”

Her t-shirt was drenched in sweat. I did my best to concentrate. I used my palms to knead her back and shoulders. I ran my thumbs down the length of her spine, applying pressure at regular intervals. When it was over I felt relieved and also sad. She was leaving in a few days.

“There,” I said, straightening myself. “All done.”

“Don’t leave,” she said. “I’m just going to change.”

I put the mat away and walked over to the two boys. I held up the pads as usual and barked instructions, but inside I was far away. *Don’t leave*, she’d said. Why? Usually our sessions ended with the stretching. There were no goodbyes apart from the occasional high five or fist bump. Why did she ask me to stay? Did she have something to say? I desperately tried to calm myself.

Joanna came out of the bathroom wearing a blue tank top and gray shorts. Her ponytail hung in a straight line down her back. I did another

round with the boys before sending them off to do squats. I sat down on a bench, pretending not to have noticed her. She came over with her bag and jug, looking like one of those Adidas models, and sat next to me.

“I’m leaving soon.”

“Are you excited?”

“Of course,” she said. Then added: “I’m a bit nervous. I’ve never gone off on my own before.”

“A few months ago you were dying to go to Germany.”

She laughed. “I guess you never really know until you’re there.”

“I’m sure it will be great.”

She glanced at me then looked out onto the street. My heart was pounding.

“Thanks again for—that night. I’d stormed out of the house, and this was the only place I could walk to. It must have been very weird for you.”

“No problem,” I said. I couldn’t bring myself to say more.

“Anyway, I’m not going to see you for a while.” She spoke very fast. Without turning, she extended a hand toward me.

The world slowed. I raised my hand to meet hers. She dropped something in it, and I looked down and saw that it was a two hundred-peso bill.

She stood up. “I gotta go. Bye.”

I watched her walk briskly down the length of the gym. *Bye*, I thought, closing my fist around the folded-up bill. It was the first time she had given me a tip.

THE NEXT SATURDAYS rolled around without my usual anticipation. I had expected it, but for the first few weeks I couldn’t help feeling disappointed. Honestly, after the last time I wasn’t even sure I wanted to see her again, but like an idiot I went on pining all the same.

I saw Nadine more and more often. Sometimes I spent the whole afternoon at her place. We would sleep all day and stay out all night, scoring cheap drinks at dead hours. I didn’t tell her that Joanna had left. Neither of us mentioned her again after that first time, and although I felt like hell inside I didn’t want to whine.

At the gym I kept to myself and avoided Don. I wasn't sure if he knew where Joanna was, but I felt certain he'd noticed her absence. The other guys did, and they often asked me when my cute student would show up. Even Yoyo took interest.

"Where is she?" he asked. Somehow he knew there was no need to mention her name.

"Singapore." He was the only one I gave a straight answer to.

"She's nice," he said. "I hope she comes back."

"In a few months."

I said that, but I'm not sure I believed it. What if I never saw her again? The thought was too frightening to consider seriously.

It was only with Nadine that I could forget about Joanna. Around that time she was caught up in her own affairs and wasn't the least bit interested in my life. Her company had recently transferred one of its regional directors to her office, and to hear her talk it seemed he was taking an interest in her. She was over the moon with the prospect.

"He's past forty, but he's not bald or fat or anything. Plus he seems genuinely nice."

It was Sunday. We had just had sex and were smoking in her bed.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"Has he made a move on you?"

"Not yet. Do you think I should start?"

"How do you know he's into you?"

"Please," she said, turning around to blow smoke out the window. "So?" She was getting impatient.

I thought for a moment. "What about love?" I knew it sounded lame, but somebody had to ask.

"What about it? It's not all that." She took a long drag.

"Tell me."

"What?"

"Tell me what made you so bitter."

She laughed. "I'm too inexperienced to be bitter. I've only had one relationship."

“Sometimes that’s more than enough.” I didn’t know what I was saying. I just wanted her to continue.

“*Siguro*. Five years, and by the end we’d grown tired of each other.”

“Did you love him?”

“I was so sure that was it.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

She shrugged. “I don’t remember.”

There was a beat of silence. Nadine turned away, then expertly blew a smoke ring. I felt bad for having dredged up those memories.

“Maybe you never really know,” I said. “You only think you do.”

“Whatever. Want to go again?” She pulled open a drawer and held up a condom packet.

I stubbed out my cigarette on the ashtray. I could feel myself getting hard again.

“Yes,” I said, pinning her arms down before she could climb on top of me. Her face showed no emotion. I traced my fingers across her hard nipples, the beads of sweat clinging to the curve of her hips. “Yes,” I said again, lowering my face to hers, for the first time not pretending she was someone else.