

# Mystic Marriage

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WHEN HIS EX future in-laws first made the proposal Roger was astounded, then freaked, then humored, then the idea began to grow on him, it was execrable, ludicrous, morbid, fascinating.

“Why not?” He asked his father who was dumbfounded and his mother who was appalled. “It’s just a ritual, right? What harm can it do? It could provide them some closure. I owe them as much.”

“You don’t owe them a thing. None of this is your fault, *our* fault. It’s on them,” his mother said.

Roger shrugged. “Nobody’s at fault. Its not about that.”

“You don’t understand these things,” his mother insisted, “its not that simple.” Roger turned to his father who shrugged and walked away.

The Yubiancos, through their nephew Lester, Roger’s buddy, had asked if Roger would consider “enacting” the wedding between him and their daughter Rosemarie that was to have taken place six months ago, three months after their engagement. But a week before the auspicious day, Rosemarie had gone with her friends to Baguio where their vehicle was hit by a runaway truck on the way home. All five on board the Nissan Sentra died from injuries.

Her parents were devastated and when the Lims came to the wake, Rosemarie’s mother, Lisa, had insisted on returning the engagement jewelry to Roger’s mother, Belinda.

Belinda refused adamantly and Lisa broke down. On the way home, Roger’s father, Carlos, had chided his wife for refusing. “Now you’ll *never* get them back,” he whispered and Belinda broke down.

“Well, maybe they just want to return the jewelry,” Roger said to his mom. “You think?” Belinda sneered, “those people ... putting me on the spot! They could’ve even sent the jewelry here. You think I’d have refused?”

No. Roger was sure his mother would’ve accepted wholeheartedly. She didn’t even like Rosemarie, all that much, he figured. She thought the Yubiancos crass for their intra-clan property dispute that had gone public.

“I wouldn’t have agreed to the match if I’d known how gross they were,” Belinda had averred back then, “fighting over money on TV.”

“It’s not exactly chump change,” Roger had reminded his mother, “might be *my* money too, you know? Someday.”

“Don’t touch it!” was all she’d said.

Still, Rosemarie at 24 had seemed a good enough match for Roger at 27 who had drifted among academic courses and girlfriends without settling on any.

“What do you want?” Belinda never tired of asking her only son.

Roger shrugged: “I’m fine.”

“Fine? You think *fine* is enough?”

“Father seems okay with it.”

“What does *he* know? You think this family would’ve gotten anywhere without me?”

Probably not, Roger mused. Belinda ran the family business—Empress Foods—that produced loads of snack foods—crackers, chips, juice drinks—sold through retailers across Luzon. Their factory was in Bulacan and main office in Greenhills, San Juan. She had used her own modest dowry to transform the small retail business Carlos inherited from his folks into a multimillion-peso concern. Her husband continued to serve as “comptroller” for the company but it was mostly for show or tax purposes, Roger soon realized, as his dad was always painting pictures of lotuses—which he sometimes inveigled friends and business clients into buying—and nudes.

Belinda had cajoled Roger to help in marketing their products with threats of cutting off his allowance, sweetened by promises of overseas travel. He finally relented after Belinda agreed to pay the down on his top-down red Mazda MX 5 and a salary that could afford him the monthly installment, but stipulated that he would be out of reach after five p.m. and on Sundays.

His mother was convinced that once Roger got the hang of it, he would take to marketing as a fish to water—he was *her* son, after all. But six months into the experiment, Belinda had to concede that there was just too much of his father in Roger and that she’d better recruit more suitable talent.

Still, it was during his period of selling tuna chips to folks in Aparri and Sasmuan,

through their network of big and small retailers from his favorite coffee shop in Bonifacio Global City (BGC), when Roger met Rosemarie.

She was the friend of a friend, and she asked Roger if his retailers could carry some of her confectionery. She had a start-up: Sylvan Sweets. “Why not?” Roger whispered after a while. He liked her full lips and cat-like eyes and gumption, and the way she said “okay” with a pout.

“You’re giving her a free ride?” his mother demanded to know from Roger. “You know how long it took to build that network? You know how much it costs to maintain?”

Roger shrugged. He had a good feeling about Rosemarie. Belinda felt a niggle in her gut but guessed that her son might be in love. And a Yubianco—albeit she was not a direct heir to the founding patriarch and their decades-old insurance firm was no longer industry leader—was preferable to any of the bubbleheads he dated or procured for his dad’s nude sketching sessions with his gang of flunkies.

She seemed to have a good business head on her shoulders and might just be the spark to ignite the entrepreneurial storm lurking inside Roger, his mother mused. Rosemarie was a bit too skinny for Belinda’s taste and spoke Hokkien and Mandarin poorly, both of which the older woman thought were becoming vital in business.

“Well, you can’t have everything in business or in life,” Belinda consoled herself. “Look what *I* got?” she whispered inwardly, eyeing her husband ogling his own nude sketch. They were a perfect pair the astrologer had assured Belinda’s parents way back when. Her Aunt Rosa, the cousin of her mother, Mei Lin, had proposed the match. The Lims were of modest means with a family grocery store in Chinatown. Their second son Carlos was nearly 26, and unmarried. His parents worried that he might elope with a classmate in art school.

“Art school?” Mei Lin was dubious.

“He likes to draw and stuff, but no worries. He helps run the store. They’re leaving it to him someday. His elder brother is training to be a Buddhist priest. I hear he has gone abroad.”

Belinda laughed to herself when she heard this. She was eavesdropping while her elders decided her future. She didn’t know any Buddhist priest though she’d seen a few up close at the temple. A classmate once told her they were “eunuchs.” She didn’t know what the word meant until much later, and decided it wasn’t true.

She wondered why a grocer’s son in Binondo would want to be celibate and vegetarian, but was intrigued. Perhaps she’d turn Buddhist too. She’d been baptized Catholic, as most everyone else in town, by her immigrant folks, but hardly practiced.

Her parents, Yap Hio Khun and Co Siu Kim, had fled China after the communist victory, as far as she knew. Her elder sister had died in childhood, leaving her an only child. Her father taught martial arts and set bones, while her mother taught at the protestant Chinese school. It was time to put them at peace regarding her future. She'd had a year of accountancy—that was enough for marriage. She saw the pen and ink portrait Carlos Lim had drawn of himself. He was named Sian Min in Chinese, and had insisted on sending a self-portrait rather than a photo, perhaps to befuddle or intimidate. But Belinda knew what he meant—that no photograph could ever capture what anyone thought of himself and that was what truly mattered. Perhaps he could make one of me too, she thought, and nodded when her parents asked if they should arrange a meeting.

She was a water monkey, and he a fire dragon. “No better match,” Master Su had said, “your daughter will be a queen mother, then an empress.”

Belinda had remembered Su's prediction when naming her business. She would indeed, head an empire. Master Su left a sad note, though—the fire dragon may burn up too soon and leave Belinda a widow before her forty-fifth year, he noted. “But not to worry. There are ways to defer these things, and he would have made a fortune by then,” Su had reassured the Yaps.

“Why couldn't the fraud have gotten that last bit right, at least?” Belinda often wondered to herself whenever she saw Carlos sunning himself in the garden like a mottled dog. She was nearing fifty and nowhere near becoming a widow. But now she had Roger to worry about. He would never become his father, Belinda swore to herself. And if sharing her vast network of retailers with the upstart confectioner was the price to pay for setting her son right, so be it. Who knows where this might all lead?

Four months after Roger and Rosemarie met, the Yubiancos invited the Lims to dinner at Peking House.

“What's this about Roger? Are you serious with this girl? They're pinning us down,” Belinda asked her son.

“Us?” Roger thought to himself, but kept his peace.

“What? Do you love her?” she asked.

Carlos woke from his stupor, and stared at his wife: “And when did *you* become Madam Lonely Hearts?”

Belinda glared at her husband. She knew Carlos now thought of her as a cold, calculating, money-machine incapable of sentiment or compassion. But that was only because he had turned her into his virtual ATM. She wrote out the checks for his deadwood art gallery—PABLO—his dubious travels, his nonexistent projects,

just to keep his paws off the business, just so he would leave his bullshit outside their home, *her* home. She used to wonder how many women he kept. Did he sleep with his models? Had he ever wanted to paint *her*, his wife? Why is it that he never asked? Never even hinted at it? There was a time when she thought he might and when she would have agreed, when it would have meant something. But now she was who she was and he a blasted, wasted, overweight slob.

"He's my son," Belinda said. "Well?" she insisted, wanting to hear from her son what she'd always wanted to hear from husband.

Roger shrugged: "I don't know ..."

Belinda exploded: "What do you mean you don't know? You think this is a game? They're planning an engagement. This could be the rest of your life."

Carlos stifled a laugh. He smirked. Belinda stared at him and swallowed back what she thought might be tears. "If we agree to meet, there's no turning back," she murmured.

"Tell me the truth, Roger."

Her son looked at Belinda oddly. "What do you want me to say? She's okay ..."

"And you think that's enough?"

Again Roger had no answer for his mother's age-old query.

"People like the Yubiancos don't propose an engagement so soon. They think they're such catches for people like us even if they're the ones living off debt."

Roger shrugged again. He didn't see himself or Rosemarie as any sort of catch, just two people who liked fast cars, fast food and cheap laughs.

"Have you gotten her pregnant?" Belinda asked.

Roger nearly fell off his seat: "Of course not."

It was the first time Belinda felt truly disappointed with her son.

The engagement at Peking House was a relatively simple affair. Roger was in his Armani suit and Rosemarie wore a blue chiffon dress by her cousin, Melissa, a fast-rising designer. She was bare-shouldered with a light silk wrap. Belinda thought her lovely for once, but only because she was beside Roger and basked in his generous glow.

The Yubiancos requested only eight tables for their guests. Belinda displayed the engagement jewelry from her extensive war chest on the buffet: amethyst brooch encrusted with diamond bits, ruby necklace, pearl earrings, gold bracelet, and five carat diamond ring, which Roger might or might not put on Rosemarie's finger later, depending on the Yubianco's protocol. She thought it a respectable yet tasteful enough display of her affection for her almost daughter-in-law. It was also a nuanced reminder for Rosemarie to be ever mindful of her obligation to husband

and in-laws if she hoped to inherit the rest of Belinda's stash someday. Roger was an only son after all. And you can't take it with you, as they say, not gemstones—they don't burn—although Belinda did put a smallish jade stone beneath her late mother's palate before interment to "light her way."

The Yubiancos, for their part, brought boxes of silk, rich textiles, fruit, finery, and a Rolex watch for Roger, which Belinda was convinced later was an expensive fake. That told her all she needed to know about her in-laws.

Both sides agreed to dispense with elaborate rites, and after the required speeches and toasting the affair's *piece de resistance* was unveiled: an oil portrait of Rosemarie in an aqua-maroon cheongsam and Roger in a dark blue masculine cheongsam rendered by his father—Carlos S. Lim. Roger was startled. He was reminded of an old engagement photo of his own paternal grandparents he had seen ages ago. How did his father paint this one? Roger had never sat for Carlos nor had Rosemarie.

The gathering was quite impressed by the painting, and Belinda was elated. She was never happier for her son and daughter-in-law to be, but decided that this was also the last injury she would accept from her husband. She looked at him as he wallowed in adulation. For months he had hinted that he was working on something special, a surprise for the family, spending hours in his atelier. Why would she even think that he was finally doing a portrait of her? Belinda laughed inwardly at her own foolishness but as she saw her husband looking back at her with an expression that seem to suggest total victory, she gagged. Something squeezed her heart that she thought was stone. Had he, in fact, been deliberately misleading her? Had he been sending subtle hints that his love or at least, admiration—if not gratitude—for her would now be made public? That what he failed to declare in their youth, he would now profess for their remaining years? You are one cruel son-of-a-bitch, Carlos Lim, Belinda whispered. I will never forgive you, never!

At least he had finally put his modest talent to some use for the family, Belinda consoled herself on the way home but that evening she handed Carlos a check worth P10 million. "Leave," she whispered. "You can continue to draw your monthly salary from the bank, but I want you out of my house. I don't want to see you again before or after the wedding."

Whatever triumph Carlos had felt at the reception dropped away like a boulder. He felt hollowed out. He knew he had done his worst and felt sick to the bone.

Carlos moved into his own condo unit and worked from his gallery. He considered doing more photography. It offered more of the truth he thought he needed to keep going.

Rosemarie's death brought them back together if only for show. They had to console with parents who had suffered the worst and quite undeservedly. But this latest proposal was outlandish, horrific, in fact if not macabre.

"This is the worst insult," Belinda said, gritting her teeth. "What do they take us for? Peasants? Beggars?" The Yubiancos had communicated that Rosemarie's dowry would be given to Roger during their "mystic marriage." They hinted that it would be a considerable sum, her personal inheritance in fact. "Seven figures at least," Lester said.

"Outrageous!" Belinda ranted. "Let them keep their stinking money."

"They say Roger can do whatever he wants with it, perhaps put up a foundation for street children like they'd discussed before the accident," Lester went on. "Need not be in her name, but why not?"

Belinda and Carlos turned to their son, incredulous. "You were planning on putting up a foundation?" Carlos asked. Roger shrugged: "Ya, why not?"

"Well, well, my son, the philanthropist, our very own Bill Gates," Belinda said.

"Not really," Roger murmured.

"You haven't made a centavo for the family or for yourself for that matter, and you want to give away money? Why don't you pay the installment on the Mazda out of your own pocket? Or better yet, why don't you sell it to fund your charitable foundation and take public transport, for once in your useless life!"

"We were just discussing it ..."

"Well, you're not marrying the dead and you're not taking money from that darn family and you're going back to work tomorrow! Enough of your infernal grieving, it's been six months! You never even got her pregnant so stop telling me you're in mourning!"

"Or?"

"Or I'm taking away the Mazda. Let's see you mourn *that!*"

"Perhaps we should find out first exactly how much is on the table?" Carlos mumbled.

"Carlos!" his wife shouted, "I always knew you were cheap, but *this?*"

"What?"

"Pimping your own son?"

"How can you say that? We're doing them a favor."

"Yes, perhaps so."

"Shut up Lester," Belinda cut in, "this is none of your business. You're just the messenger, and I'm this close to shooting you."

"So why now?" Carlos asked. "It's been six months."

“My aunt Emma, Rosemarie’s mother, has been having strange dreams, she’s in a bad way. She thinks Rosie’s reaching out. Her psychiatrist says this ritual might help, and this Taoist ritual master suggested a mystical wedding,” Lester said.

“So how does it work?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never seen one.”

“Are they thinking of holding it at home?”

“At the Taoist temple, I think.”

“And I suppose we’d all have to be there ...”

“No way!” Belinda cut in.

“So, is Roger tying the knot with someone or something? A doll? A picture? A cockerel? Paper mache? What happens exactly?”

“Enough! Its not happening, stop talking about it!” Belinda stomped off.

“I hear that it’s alright to have a stand in, a volunteer. Someone with the same astrology as Rosemarie or compatible ...”

“I’m doing it,” Roger said.

“No, you’re not!” Belinda shot back.

“Don’t you have any self-respect?”

“I ... I love her.”

Belinda felt a phantom punch on her gut. “No, you don’t, stop lying. You’re doing this to spite me. I don’t know why you hate me so much but everything I did I did for you! You think you can ever live down the shame of doing this?”

“Not everything’s about you, Mother. Take away the damn car, I don’t care.”

“Stop this, Roger. Please ... I’m begging you. Don’t be a child; you’re a grown man.”

“Grown men take responsibility.”

“For what? She’s dead. Life goes on.”

“Responsibility doesn’t end with death.”

“And who taught you that? So you’re a philosopher now? Dead is dead! And it’s time her parents accepted that, stopped dragging other people into their misery! What will they want next? Ghost grandkids?”

“Either we do this ... as a family,” Roger started saying.

“Or?” Belinda cut in.

“Or, I’m going away with ... Agnes.”

Belinda’s face froze then thawed. She turned to Carlos: “This is all your fault! You! This is on you ... you and your ... floozies! Go do whatever you want, the both of you! Go sell your souls to the devil, you rotten pair! You’re Lims! I’m not! I’m a Yap.

We come from good stock. My grandfather was a magistrate, my father an officer, my mother taught history and classics. We are people of learning and dignity. I will have nothing more to do with you riffraff. I renounce you!"

Belinda stormed out of the house. Roger looked to his father. "Grandfather was a magistrate?"

Carlos shrugged: "First time I heard it. Last she said he was an executioner, cut off heads."

They were silent a while, weighing the enormity of all that had just been said. Since Rosemarie's death, Carlos had dated Agnes Nuñez. They had met over a year ago at a BGC bar and had hit it off. She was an art school drop out, a sometime graphic designer. "My dad's a painter," Roger had told her. "Really what does he paint?" Lotuses seemed too lame for Roger's purpose so he said: "Nudes."

Her eyes lit up and before long he had brought Agnes to PABLO where his father and his Monday group of six other guys and three women did their bimonthly nude sketching. Carlos asked Roger to join in. "You know I don't sketch," he said.

"You can be official photographer," Carlos said, proffering his son the digital camera and looking to Agnes. "I don't mind," she said, "just no posting on line, without my consent."

Roger thought about it but decided to leave. Somehow, being in the same space with a naked woman he knew, along with his father, albeit with others, made him uneasy. When he was a boy his father would sometimes take him to the gallery on weekends, and he'd watch the sessions. His father directed the nude models. Carlos had encouraged Roger to draw, but the talent just wasn't there. He was neither parent's son, Roger decided early on. He wondered if he were adopted then perished the thought. Then his father stopped taking him to PABLO. Roger figured that his mother had found out about the models.

Agnes became the group's favorite; other guest artists joined them subsequently. Roger never inquired but guessed she made a tidy sum that allowed her to work on her graphic projects. She modeled for them at least once a month and soon her nude visage was adorning the Lims' home library, the dining room, the master's bedroom. One day Belinda rounded up all the nudes featuring Agnes hung inside their home and made a bon fire in the garden.

So when she suspected that Roger was dating Agnes, Belinda confronted Carlos. "Make sure this doesn't go any farther than it should," she warned her husband.

"Relax, he's still hurting, just coming out of his shell," Carlos said.

"Bull shit. I don't buy any of that crap!"

So when Belinda saw the blown up photos of Agnes in her son's room she raged

like a tornado into her husband's studio: "Sent her away! Pay her! How much does she want?"

"You think it's all about money?"

"My son is not marrying that bitch ... or any of your naked ... floozies!"

"It may not be up to you this time."

"Oh, yes it is."

"What is this really about?"

"What is this about? It's about your son!"

"Who is a grownup?"

"He's a child! An overgrown boy! You never taught him anything! Never taught him about real life! About responsibility, consequences ..."

"You're the one who's always nagging him about not settling for 'fine' or 'okay,' about 'wanting!' Well, he wants *her*! He's in love!"

Belinda was close to tears so Carlos handed her the box of tissues. "I'm not letting him marry some naked woman you ogled," she said.

In his dream Rosemarie was wearing her engagement dress. She was with his maternal grandmother who was in her olive green cheongsam, the one she sometimes wore whenever he visited. They seemed bright and happy while having tea and pastries in a garden of peonies, and plum and gold fish pond. He hurried to them. "So you've met?" he asked, the women eyed him curiously.

"This is my granddaughter," the older woman said.

"She is my granny," the younger one said.

"No, you're my grandma and she's my fiancée."

The two women seemed stunned then burst into laughter. "Here, have some pastries, stranger," they said. The pastries tasted unlike anything he'd had. "These are great. Did you bake them?" he asked. "Of course not. You think we have nothing better to do here than bake for you?" the younger one replied,

"Stop fooling," he said.

He saw a young man on a white horse. "Is he the one?" he asked the older woman.

She smiled: "Perhaps you are in the wrong place," she said.

He looked about and saw that he was really inside a hotel function room. The older woman pointed to the room divider. He pulled it aside and saw her naked on the dais save for a white sash that covered half her torso and crotch. He thought she was Agnes but couldn't be certain. He saw his father and others sketching. He struggled to reach her. Then he tried to grab her but his hands touched only air. His arms passed right through her body. Then he felt something wet and slimy; he was pulling out entrails.

Roger awoke in a fit. He steadied himself with a shot of brandy and tried calling up Agnes, but she could not be reached. She had blocked his calls for days. Last they spoke she had insisted that he make up his mind. “Are we or aren’t we together?” she asked.

“There’s just this one thing I have to do,” he said.

“I know about *that*. If you do it, we’re through,” she replied.

“How?”

“Lester told me.”

“It’s just a ritual. It has nothing to do with you.”

“You think?”

Belinda was smoking at the dinner table. It had been a while since Roger saw his mom smoke. He knew she’d been trying to quit, though would not admit to it. He came over and she motioned for him to sit beside her. It had been a while since he did.

“When I was a boy, grandmother told me a story,” Roger started. Belinda knew that her son was talking about her own mother whenever he said that. Up to when Roger turned five they lived with Carlos’ parents and helped run the store. After the fire that razed their side of Chinatown, they moved uptown and started Empress. Carlos’s folk remained in Binondo and set up a smaller store they tended until their passing five years later from heart failures—they died within months of each other. Belinda knew Carlos had always felt guilty for abandoning his parents and perhaps shortening their lives. She knew he blamed *her*.

Belinda’s own father passed on at seventy from a brain injury suffered in a martial arts bout. Her mother retired from teaching but refused to move in with them and stayed in her own apartment in Sto. Cristo. She sometimes wrote for the Chinese papers. On certain weekends, Belinda would drop off Roger at her mother’s place while she checked out retailers in Binondo and Divisoria. She knew her mother missed teaching and Roger was a perfect pupil. He loved listening to his granny’s stories even as she helped with his homework for Chinese class. But there was a time when Roger’s sleep became fitful and he had strange dreams. Belinda knew it was time to curtail the visits. Now, those stories were coming back and she braced herself for the unknown.

*She was fourteen when her family told her she was to be married, she’d learned enough and they were now poor. When she entered the big house, she could hear music and fireworks. There was a dancing dragon. They gave her a green chi pao to wear. She knelt before two old people and offered them tea, and kowtowed. But where was the boy*

*she was to marry? There was only a portrait of him they tied to her back. She found out that her groom had died a month ago and that she was to marry his ghost so that he would have progeny in the afterlife so that he would not be a hungry ghost with no one to tend his grave and feed him when his parents were gone. She did not understand, but they said she would in time. They fed her and treated her well but gave her mourning clothes to wear. She was now a widow. She had many servants and did not labor unlike in her natal home. After your mourning period of two years, we will find you a man and your children will be our grandchildren, the dead boy's parents said. They will be the children of our son and call him father, and light his incense, this other man will be their uncle, they said, but you will always be their mother, and our daughter-in-law. But one day a stranger came. He roared like the lion and laughed like the hyena. "What feudal nonsense is this?" he asked the household. "You wed living beings to the dead? Are you insane?" he asked.*

*"How dare you mock our ways?" the old ones shouted at him. "Be gone before we have you arrested and flogged."*

*"Arrest me?" Again he laughed and fired his weapon that he had kept tucked inside his shirt. Everyone ran for cover while the man's cohorts entered the courtyard with other weapons.*

*"The world has changed, you fools! We are here to liberate you, at last," the man railed. "The republic has outlawed your antiquated ways! No more ghost brides! No more concubines! No more bound feet! No more slaves! All are equal under the law!"*

*"Whose law?" the old one asked, "Sun's Law? Chiang's Law?"*

*"Better us than the commies," the younger one said.*

*"Go! Leave us in peace! You and your revolutions and wars! What good have they done? My son is dead!"*

*"Feed us and you live," the man said. They stayed for three days and had their fill of the household's food stock but did not harm anyone. When they were about to leave, the man asked the young widow if she wanted to join them.*

*"These are my in-laws," she said, "my family; it is my duty to stay."*

*"You owe them nothing, young one, they married you to a dead person, the law does not recognize such things. If you stay, who knows what happens? Perhaps that old fogey might decide to father a new son himself."*

*"Bastard! I will do no such thing! I'm a respectable, decent person unlike brigands like you!" the old one ranted.*

*"Really? That is not what I hear from the servants."*

*"Liar! You will not malign me!" the old man shouted and came at the young man with his cane but the young man shot at him. The bullet grazed the old one's temple but he fell to the ground and his household rushed to him.*

*“So? Are you coming or not?” The young man asked the young woman, no longer a widow under the Republic. She hesitated. The household stared at her, but she saw a light in the young man’s eyes that touched her in hidden places. She bowed her head then walked to his side.*

*“I curse you!” the older man ranted. “My son curses you! Your husband curses you! Heaven will not forgive you! You and your descendants are cursed for eternity!” he shouted. “There will be no pity! No mercy! You have betrayed your family! Your honor! You are worse than animals! Even hell denounces you!”*

*The old man’s words rang in her ears as the young woman rode away on the donkey alongside the man. They rode on and on, only stopping for food and a bit of sleep. After five days they reached camp but it had been razed. Some survivors told them their enemies had won. “The communist bandits have taken Beijing,” they said, “there is a boat sailing tonight, come with us if you want.”*

*“Where are you headed?” the man asked.*

*“Where it is safe. Then we might regroup in Taiwan.”*

*The man looked to the woman who had rode alongside him for days. She laid her head on his shoulder. That night they sailed away with the strangers and never looked back.”*

Belinda was nearly floored by her son’s story. She was close to tears. It was the first time she had heard it. “Your granny loved telling stories, she was a writer; she made up stuff. They’re not true, not all of them, you should hear some of the stories she told *me*,” Belinda said, defeated. “Look, that was not *her*,” she pleaded with her son.

“Does it matter?” Roger asked.

“I shouldn’t have left you with her that much,” she muttered. “She was no ghost bride, there’s no curse, you don’t have to do this, son. You don’t have to redeem the family from anything. She made her choices. We all do!”

Roger looked at his mother, and she touched his face for the first time in a long while.

The Great Mystic Taoist Temple in Quezon City looked innocuous from the outside but had brilliant, gold-plated interiors. It smelled of camphor and incense, and reminded Roger of a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. He felt goose bumps. A statue of Se Tian Gong—Lord of the Western Heaven—the temple deity, dominated. He was a yang deity who ministered only in daytime; the yin deities, on the other hand functioned after sundown and their temple interiors were often dark and eerie.

Roger came in *barong* Filipino, his best concession to formality for the occasion. His parents were in semiformal wear as were the Yubiancos. The altar was bedecked

with ritual offerings and much of the stuff that festooned the engagement buffet table at Peking House six months ago—boxes of silk, confectionery, and Belinda’s jewelry. Belinda gave Carlos a knowing glance. There were also personal effects of Rosemarie—clothes, shoes, and dolls. To Carlos’s surprise and unease, his painting of her and Roger was now removed from its wooden frame and tucked into a cardboard frame.

The parents sat in ceremonial wooden chairs at the feet of Se Tian Gong and Roger knelt on a padded pew before them. Belinda saw how sunken Lisa was and was deeply saddened. She was now glad they were doing this.

The ritual master entered with two assistants. He was in a red silken robe embroidered with dragons and an ancient magistrate’s hat. Roger had seen in it movies and wondered if his maternal grandfather wore the same sort of thing.

The aides lit joss sticks and handed them to Master Chua. He knelt before the deity, raised the incense to his crown and bowed thrice. Then the aides took the sticks and placed them in the big urn beside him. There was a bit of silence. Then Master Chua started to tremble and groan. He shook more violently, turned to Roger, stomped his feet and assumed a martial stance. Roger was taken aback but kept his composure. He assumed Chua was now channeling Se Tian Gong.

Then the master signaled and his aides escorted her in. Roger saw Agnes in Rosemarie’s engagement dress, with a cotton shawl over her bare shoulders. He balked. He wanted to jump up but the master glared at him and grunted.

Agnes glanced at Roger but avoided direct eye contact as she knelt beside him. Roger could hear his heart pounding against his rib cage. “Why?” he mumbled. But the master shushed him. Agnes took a few deep breaths. She tried mightily not to look at him or make a sound.

“They’ve crossed the line,” Roger thought. He’d been sporting, he’d agreed to this if only to give the Yubiancos some peace, but now they’ve involved even his girlfriend. This was unconscionable. His mother was right—these people know no limits; they think they own everyone! Did they pay Agnes to do this? The thought suddenly rattled him. He looked away and saw Lester in a corner. “You did this,” he muttered. The master hushed him again. Roger felt his insides churning.

But as Master Chua turned away, Agnes squeezed Roger’s hand. He felt her warmth enter him, caress his every pore, tears welled up, and he sobbed. “Quiet!” the master insisted. Agnes pulled away.

Then they were both given joss sticks and made to kowtow before their parents thrice, before Se Tian Gong, before Heaven. They kowtowed to the north, the east,

the south, and the west so all in this and in other worlds may know that Roger Lim—Lim Tiak Sun—and Rosemarie Yubianco—Yu Li Hwa—were husband and wife. Master Chua placed identical gold bracelets—from his mom’s jewelry Roger recognized—on Agnes’s and Roger’s wrists and tied them together with a ritual kerchief.

Then they all proceeded to a pit outside, where a box, dress, doll, and a pair of shoes and bundles of spirit money were set aflame. These were symbolic offerings to Rosemarie’s spirit, Roger assumed, but next came Carlos’s painting. He was shocked and turned to see his dad’s deathly pale countenance. He saw Belinda grabbing on to Carlos, to prevent him, it seemed, from rushing into the fire.

But as the painting burned Roger felt a cold weight inside him melting away as well. He imagined his heart opening slightly and a bird slipping out, soaring to the sky along with the smoke of burnt offering.

After the ritual the families shared a modest repast and Lisa returned the engagement jewelry to Belinda. She received them with deep sorrow and just a tad of relief.

“So they’re naming the foundation Lotus?” Carlos asked as he prepped his easel and pen. Looking for a soft angle, he opened the blinds slightly to let in more light.

“Yep, it’s Agnes’s idea,” Belinda said, taking off her frock and wrapping the shawl about herself, as if preparing for bath. She felt like an adolescent again. It had been years since she visited the gallery. She missed it, somehow.

“And Roger’s out of the business too?”

“He’s replacing you as Comptroller. I’m kicking you up to Oversight.”

“Really?”

“So are they getting married?” Carlos asked.

“Weren’t they?” Belinda retorted with a glint in her eyes.

“You don’t intend to part with your jewelry again, do you?”

“Not too soon.”

“So why’d she agree to it?”

“Lester convinced her, said her astrology was perfect and that it would be good for everyone.”

“Savvy kid.”

“Yup, and for that I’m making him head of Marketing. If he can make a live girlfriend stand in for a dead one, he can sell chips.”

Carlos chuckled and Belinda remembered to ask, at last: “So why’d you ever agree to marry me?”

Carlos looked at the woman he was about to sketch and remembered the long-ago lass with braids and dimples, and wide eyes: “You believed me when I said I painted this picture I showed you.”

“I did? What was it?”

“The *Mona Lisa*.”

“No, I did not!” Belinda threw her frock at him.

“And you? Why’d you agree to me?”

“Because of your brother,” she mused.

“My brother?” Carlos frowned.

“The Buddhist priest ... I figured a family that raised a priest wasn’t too bad ... so how is he?”

“I never had a brother who turned priest. Who ever told you *that*?”

“My aunt, or the matchmaker, I always thought ...”

“And you never asked?”

“You guys never mentioned it, so I thought your parents didn’t like talking about the matter. In time it just became irrelevant.”

Carlos looked askance.

Belinda was astonished but unappeased: “So you never had a brother? I remember these photos ...”

“A sister, Julia,” Carlos said.

*Julia*. Belinda remembered the name. Then she remembered the portraits, the sketches. He had named one of them *Julia*. Yes, maybe more than one. It didn’t matter. She didn’t care to ask who Julia was. She wanted him to tell her, but he never did. She remembered being jealous: Of whom, of what? She remembered thinking Julia was the *one*, perhaps the girl in art school? Then she decided he would never be rid of Julia, would never stop sketching her and it was time for Belinda to be Belinda.

“She was five years my senior,” he said. “She became very ill at thirteen, needed a blood transfusion but none of us in the family had a similar type. We had to find someone else. She decided that we weren’t her real family, and demanded the truth. She was bright; you couldn’t lie to her even then. So my folks told her that they were childless three years into their marriage, and when this infant was smuggled into the country by relatives from China during the famine of 1957, they adopted her. Since then Julia would talk about returning to China to find her real family; it hurt Mom a lot. We thought it would pass but shortly before Martial Law, she disappeared. She had these leftwing friends in school so my folks worried she’d gone underground or been arrested. But I got a postcard from Hong Kong, and we knew she had entered China. She was 17.”

Belinda was stunned: "And you never heard from her again?"

Carlos shook his head that seemed to weigh heavily. "I hope she found her family, at least," his wife said.

"I doubt that," he whispered.

"Why not? Who knows?" She felt strangely aggrieved.

"Before she died my mother told me that Julia's birth mother was Aling Miling, our long time house help. She got pregnant at 16 by a married man and considered abortion. My folks offered to adopt her child and swore to keep her secret. They never told anyone the truth, not even Julia. She believed their tale so thoroughly that it changed the course of two lives. Miling was the one who gave Julia blood when she fell sick, and when her daughter disappeared she became quite distraught. She went home to the province, and we never saw her again."

"My God ... what a family you were," Belinda murmured, suddenly exhausted.

"See how dangerous stories can be, my dear?" Carlos said, playful once more.

"Well, they can save us, too, right?" Belinda retorted. "Maybe your folks made up the story for *you*."

"Why would they do that?"

"Who knows?" She shrugged: "Who knows what folks will do for their kids?"

In the soft light Belinda thought she was seeing Carlos for the first time, like the time she first saw his self-portrait and laughed to herself. "No wonder you're so ..." she began.

"What?" he challenged.

"*Damaged*."

"Me? Damaged? Look at *you*."

"So, look," she said and dropped her shawl.