

5 Through the window curtain, Alipio saw two women, one seemed twice as large as the other. In their summer dresses, they looked like the country girls he knew back home in the Philippines, who went around peddling rice cakes. The slim one could have passed for his late wife Seniang's sister whom he remembered only in pictures because she never made it to the United States. Before Seniang's death, the couple had arranged for her coming to San Francisco, filing all the required petition papers to facilitate the approval of her visa. The sister was always "almost ready, all the papers have been signed," but she never showed up. His wife had been ailing and when she died, he thought that hearing of her death would hasten her coming, but the wire he had sent her was neither returned nor acknowledged.

15 The knocking on the door was gentle. A little hard of hearing, Alipio was not sure it was indeed a knocking on the door, but it sounded different from the little noises that sometimes hummed in his ears in the daytime. It was not yet noon, but it must be warm outside in all that sunshine, otherwise those two women would be wearing spring dresses at the least. There were summer days in San Francisco that were cold like winter in the Midwest.

20 He limped painfully to the door. Until last month, he wore crutches. The entire year before that, he was bed-ridden, but he had to force himself to walk about in the house after coming from the hospital. After Seniang's death, everything had gone to pieces. It was one bust after another, he complained to the few friends who came to visit him.

25 "Seniang was my good luck. When God decided to take her, I had nothing but bad luck," he said.

Not long after Seniang's death, he was in a car accident. For almost a year he was in the hospital. The doctors were not sure he was going to walk again. He told them it was God's wish. As it was he was thankful he was still alive. It had been a horrible
30 accident.

The case dragged on in court. His lawyer didn't seem too good about car accidents. He was an expert immigration lawyer, but he was a friend. As it turned out, Alipio lost the full privileges and benefits coming to him in another two years if he had not been hospitalized and had continued working until his official retirement.

However, he was well provided. He didn't spend a cent for doctor and medicine and hospital bills. Now there was the prospect of a few thousand dollars compensation. After deducting his lawyer's fees it would still be something to live on. He had social security benefits and a partial retirement pension. Not too bad, really. Besides, now
5 he could walk a little although he still limped and had to move about with extreme care.

When he opened the door, the fat woman said, "Mr. Palma? Alipio Palma?" Her intonation sounded like the beginning of a familiar song.

"Yes," he said. "Come in, come on in." He had not talked to anyone the whole week.
10 His telephone had not rung all that time, not even a wrong number, and there was nobody he wanted to talk to. The little noises in his ears had somehow kept him company. Radio and television sounds lulled him to sleep.

The thin one was completely out of sight as she stood behind the big one who was doing the talking. "I'm sorry, I should have phoned you first, but we were in a
15 hurry."

"The house is a mess," Alipio said truthfully. Had he been imagining things? He remembered seeing two women on the porch. There was another one, who looked like Seniang's sister. The woman said "we," and just then the other one materialized, close behind the big one, who walked in with the assurance of a social worker, about
20 to do him a favor.

"Sit down. Sit down. Anywhere," Alipio said as he led the two women through the dining room, past a huge rectangular table in the center. It was bare except for a vase of plastic flowers as centerpiece. He passed his hand over his face, a mannerism which Seniang hated. Like you have a hang-over, she chided him, and you can't see
25 straight.

A TV set stood close to a wall in the small living room crowded with an assortment of chairs and tables. An aquarium crowded the mantelpiece of a fake fireplace. A lighted bulb inside the tank showed many colored fish swimming about in a haze of fish food. Some of it lay scattered on the edge of the shelf. The carpet underneath was sodden
30 black. Old magazines and tabloids lay just about everywhere.

"Sorry to bother you like this," the fat one said as she plunked herself down on the nearest chair, which sagged to the floor under her weight. The thin one chose the end of the sofa away from the TV set.

"I was just preparing my lunch. I know it's quite early, but I had nothing to do,"
35 Alipio said, pushing down with both hands the seat of the cushioned chair near a

moveable partition, which separated the living room from the dining room. "It's painful just trying to sit down. I'm not too well yet," he added as he finally made it.

"I hope we're not really bothering you," the fat one said. The other had not said a word. She looked pale and sick. Maybe she was hungry or cold.

5 "How's it outside?" Alipio asked. "I've not been out all day." Whenever he felt like it, he dragged a chair to the porch and sat there, watching the construction going on across the street and smiling at the people passing by who happened to look his way. Some smiled back and mumbled something like a greeting or a comment on the beauty of the day. He stayed on until he got bored or it became colder than he could
10 stand.

"It's fine. It's fine outside. Just like Baguio," the fat one said.

"You know Baguio? I was born near there."

"We're sisters."

Alipio was thinking, won't the other one speak at all?

15 "I'm Mrs. Antonieta Zafra, the wife of Carlito. I believe you know him. He says you're friends. In Salinas back in the thirties. He used to be a cook at the Marina."

"Carlito, yes, yes, Carlito Zafra. We bummed together. We come from Ilocos. Where you from?"

"Aklan. My sister and I speak Cebuano."

20 "Oh, she speak? You, you don't speak Ilocano?"

"Not much. Carlito and I talk in English. Except when he's real mad, like when his cock don't fight or when he lose, then he speaks Ilocano. Cuss words. I've learned them myself. Some, anyway."

"Yes. Carlito. He love cockfighting. How's he?"

25 "Retired like you. We're now in Fresno. On a farm. He raises chickens and hogs. I do some sewing in town when I can. My sister here is Monica. She's older than me. Never been married."

Monica smiled at the old man, her face in anguish, as if near to tears.

“Carlito. He got some fighting cocks, I bet.”

“Not anymore. But he talks a lot about cockfighting. But nobody, not even the pinoy and the Chicanos are interested in it.” Mrs. Zafra appeared pleased at the state of things on her home front.

5 “I remember. Carlito once promoted a cockfight. Everything was ready, but the roosters won’t fight. Poor man, he did everything to make them fight like having them peck on each other’s necks and so forth. They were so tame, so friendly with each other. Only thing they didn’t do is embrace.” Alipio laughed, showing a set of perfectly white and even teeth, obviously dentures.

10 “He hasn’t told me about that, I’ll remind him.”

“Do that. Where’s he? Why isn’t he with you?”

“We didn’t know we’d find you. While visiting some friends this morning, we learned you live here.” Mrs. Zafra was beaming on him.

15 “I’ve always lived here, but I got few friends now. So you’re Mrs. Carlito. I thought he’s dead already. I never hear from him. We’re old now. We’re old already when we got our citizenship papers right after Japanese surrender. So you and him. Good for Carlito.”

“I heard about your accident.”

20 “After Seniang died. She was not yet sixty, but she had this heart trouble. I took care of her.” Alipio seemed to have forgotten his visitors. He sat there staring at the fish in the aquarium, his ears perked as though waiting for some sound, like the breaking of the surf not far away, or the TV set suddenly turned on.

The sisters looked at each other. Monica was fidgeting, her eyes seemed to say, let’s go, let’s get out of here.

25 “Did you hear that?” the old man said.

Monica turned to her sister, her eyes wild with panic. Mrs. Zafra leaned forward, her hand touching the edge of the chair where Alipio sat, and asked gently, “Hear what?”

30 “The waves. Listen. They’re just outside, you know. The breakers have a nice sound like at home in the Philippines. We lived in a coastal town. Like here, I always tell Seniang, across that ocean is the Philippines, we’re not far from home.”

“But you’re alone now. It’s not good to be alone,” Mrs. Zafra said.

5 “At night I hear better. I can see the Pacific Ocean from my bedroom. It sends me to sleep. I sleep soundly like I got no debts. I can sleep all day, too, but that’s bad. So I walk. I walk much before. I go out there. I let the breakers touch me. It’s nice the touch. Seniang always scold me, she says I’ll be catching cold, but I don’t catch cold, she catch the cold all the time.”

“You must miss her,” Mrs. Zafra said. Monica was staring at her hands on her lap while the sister talked. Monica’s skin was transparent and the veins showed on the back of her hands like trapped eels.

10 “I take care of Seniang. I work all day and leave her here alone. When I come home, she’s smiling. She’s wearing my jacket and my slippers. You look funny, I says, why do you wear my things, you’re lost inside them. She chuckles, you keep me warm all day, she says, like you’re here, I smell you. Oh, that Seniang. You see, we have no baby. If we have a baby . . .”

15 “I think you and Carlito have the same fate. We have no baby also.”

“God dictates,” Alipio said, making an effort to stand. In a miraculous surge of power, Monica rushed to him and helped him up. She seemed astonished and embarrassed at what she had done.

20 “Thank you,” said Alipio. “I have crutches, but I don’t want no crutches. They tickle me, they hurt me, too.” He watched Monica go back to her seat.

“You need help better than crutches,” Mrs. Zafra said.

“God helps,” Alipio said, walking towards the kitchen as if expecting to find the Almighty there.

Mrs. Zafra followed him. “What are you preparing?” she asked.

25 “Let’s have lunch,” he said, “I’m hungry. I hope you are also.”

“We’ll help you,” Mrs. Zafra said, turning back to where Monica sat staring at her hands again and listening perhaps for the sound of the sea. She had not noticed nor heard her sister when she called, “Monica!”

The second time she heard her. Monica stood up and went to the kitchen.

“There’s nothing to prepare,” Alipio was saying, as he opened the refrigerator.
“What you want to eat? Me, I don’t eat bread so I got no bread. I eat rice. I was just opening a can of sardines when you come. I like sardines with lotsa tomato sauce, it’s great with hot rice.”

5 “Don’t you cook the sardines?” Mrs. Zafra asked. “Monica will cook it for you if you want.”

“No! If you cook sardines, it taste bad. Better uncooked. Besides it gets cooked on top of the hot rice. Mix with onions, chopped nice. Raw not cooked. You like it?”

“Monica loves raw onions, don’t you, Sis?”

10 “Yes,” Monica said in a low voice.

“Your sister, she is well?” Alipio said, glancing towards Monica.

Mrs. Zafra gave her sister an angry look.

“I’m okay,” Monica said, a bit louder this time.

15 “She’s not sick,” Mrs. Zafra said, “But she’s shy. Her own shadow frightens her. I tell you, this sister of mine, she got problems.”

“Oh?” Alipio exclaimed. He had been listening quite attentively.

“I eat onions, raw,” Monica said. “Sardines, too, I like uncooked.”

Her sister smiled. “What do you say, I run out for some groceries,” she said, going back to the living room to get her bag.

20 “Thanks. But no need for you to do that. I got lotsa food, canned food. Only thing I haven’t got is bread,” Alipio said.

“I eat rice, too,” Monica said.

25 Alipio reached up to open the cabinet. It was stacked full of canned food: corn beef, pork and beans, Vienna sausage, tuna, crab meat, shrimp, chow mein, imitation noodles, and, of course, sardines, in green and yellow labels.

“The yellow ones with mustard sauce, not tomato,” he explained.

"All I need is a cup of coffee," Mrs. Zafra said, throwing her handbag back on the chair in the living room.

Alipio opened two drawers near the refrigerator. "Look," he said as Mrs. Zafra came running back to the kitchen. "I got more food to last me . . . a long time."

- 5 The sisters gaped at the bags of rice, macaroni, spaghetti sticks, sugar, dried shrimps wrapped in cellophane, bottles of soy sauce and fish sauce, vinegar, ketchup, instant coffee, and more cans of sardines.

10 The sight of all that foodstuff seemed to have enlivened the old man. After all, food meant life, continuing sustenance, source of energy and health. "Now look here," he said, turning briskly now to the refrigerator, which he opened, the sudden light touching his face with a glow that erased years from his eyes. With a jerk he pulled open the large freezer, cramped full of meats. "Mostly lamb chops," he said, adding, "I like lamb chops."

"Carlito, he hates lamb chops," Mrs. Zafra said.

- 15 "I like lamb chops," Monica said, still wild eyed, but now a bit of color tinted her cheeks. "Why do you have so much food?" she asked.

20 Alipio looked at her before answering. He thought she looked younger than Mrs. Zafra. "You see," he said, closing the refrigerator. He was beginning to chill. "I watch the papers for bargain sales. I can still drive the car when I feel right. It's only now my legs bothering me. So. I buy all I can. Save me many trips. Money, too."

Later they sat around the enormous table in the dining room. Monica shared half a plate of boiling rice topped with a sardine with Alipio. He showed her how to place the sardine on top, pressing it a little and pouring spoonfuls of tomato juice over it.

- 25 Mrs. Zafra had coffee and settled for a small can of vienna sausage and a little rice. She sipped her coffee meditatively.

"This is good coffee," she said. "I remember how we used to hoard Hills Bros. coffee at . . . at the convent. The sisters were quite selfish about it."

"Antonietta was a nun, a sister of mercy," Monica said.

- 30 "What?" Alipio exclaimed, pointing a finger at her for no apparent reason, an involuntary gesture of surprise.

“Yes, I was,” Mrs. Zafra admitted. “When I married, I had been out of the order for more than a year, yes, in California, at St. Mary’s.”

“You didn’t . . .” Alipio began.

5 “Of course not,” she interrupted him. “If you mean did I leave the order to marry Carlito. Oh, no. He was already an old man when I met him.”

“I see. We used to joke him because he didn’t like the girls too much. He prefer the cocks.” The memory delighted him so much, he reared his head up as he laughed, covering his mouth hastily, but too late. Some of the tomato soaked grains had already spilled out on his plate and on the table in front of him.

10 Monica looked pleased as she gathered carefully some of the grains on the table.

“He hasn’t changed,” Mrs. Zafra said vaguely. “It was me who wanted to marry him.”

15 “You? After being a nun, you wanted to marry . . . Carlito? But why Carlito?” Alipio seemed to have forgotten for the moment that he was still eating. The steam from the rice touched his face till it glistened darkly. He was staring at Mrs. Zafra as he breathed in the aroma without savoring it.

“It’s a long story,” Mrs. Zafra said. She stabbed a chunky sausage and brought it to her mouth. She looked pensive as she chewed on it.

“When did this happen?”

20 “Five, six years ago. Six years ago, almost.”

“That long?”

“She had to marry him,” Monica said blandly.

“What?” Alipio shouted, visibly disturbed. There was the sound of dentures grating in his mouth. He passed a hand over his face. “Carlito done that to you?”

25 The coffee spilled a little as Mrs. Zafra put the cup down. “Why no,” she said. “What are you thinking of?”

Before he could answer, Monica spoke in the same tone of voice, low, unexcited, saying, “He thinks Carlito got you pregnant, that’s what.”

“Carlito?” She turned to Monica in disbelief. “Why, Alipio knows Carlito,” she said.

Monica shrugged her shoulders. “Why don’t you tell him why?” she suggested.

“As I said, it’s a long story, but I shall make it short,” Mrs. Zafra began. She took a sip from her cup and continued, “After leaving the order, I couldn’t find a job. I was
5 interested in social work, but I didn’t know anybody who could help me.”

As she paused, Alipio said, “What the heck does Carlito know about social work?”

“Let me continue,” Mrs. Zafra said.

She still had a little money, from home, and she was not too worried about being
jobless. But there was the question of her status as an alien. Once out of the
10 community, she was no longer entitled to stay in the United States, let alone secure
employment. The immigration office began to hound her, as it did other Filipinos in
similar predicaments. They were a pitiful lot. Some hid in the apartments of friends
like criminals running away from the law. Of course, they were law breakers. Those
with transportation money returned home, which they hated to do. At home they
15 would be forced to invent stories, tell lies to explain away why they returned so soon.
All their lives they had to learn how to cope with the stigma of failure in a foreign
land. They were losers and no longer fit for anything useful. The more sensitive and
weak lost their minds and had to be committed to insane asylums. Others became
neurotic, antisocial, depressed in mind and spirit. Some turned to crime. Or just
20 folded up, in a manner of speaking. It was a nightmare. Antonieta didn’t want to go
back to the Philippines under those circumstances. She would have had to be very
convincing to prove that she was not thrown out of the order for immoral reasons.
Just when she seemed to have reached the breaking point, she recalled incidents in
which women in her situation married American citizens and, automatically, became
25 entitled to permanent residency with an option to become U.S. citizens after five
years. At first, she thought the idea of such a marriage was hideous, unspeakable.
Perhaps other foreign women in similar situations, could do it—and have done it—
but not Philippine girls. But what was so special about Philippine girls? Nothing
really, but their upbringing was such that to place themselves in a situation where
30 they had to tell a man that all they wanted was a marriage for convenience, was
degrading, an unbearable shame. A form of self-destruction. Mortal sin. Better
repatriation. A thousand times better.

When an immigration officer finally caught up with her, he proved to be very
understanding and quite a gentleman. Yet he was firm. He was young, maybe of
35 Italian descent, and looked like a salesman for a well-known company in the islands
that dealt in farm equipment.

“I’m giving you one week,” he said. “You have already overstayed by several months. If in one week’s time, you haven’t left yet, you might have to wait in jail for deportation proceedings.”

She cried, oh, how she cried. She wished she had not left the order, no, not really.

5 She had no regrets about leaving up to this point. Life in the convent had turned sour on her. She despised the sisters and the system, which she found tyrannical, inhuman. In her own way, she had a long series of talks with God and God had approved of the step she had taken. She was not going back to the order. Anyhow, even if she did, she would not be taken back. To jail then?

10 But why not marry an American citizen? In one week’s time? How? Accost the first likely man and say, “You look like an American citizen. If you are, indeed, and you have the necessary papers to prove it, will you marry me? I want to remain in this country.”

15 All week she talked to God. It was the same God she had worshipped and feared all her life. Now they were palsy walsy, on the best of terms. As she brooded over her misfortune, He brooded with her, sympathized with her, and finally advised her to go look for an elderly Filipino who was an American citizen, and tell him the truth of the matter. Tell him that if he wished, it could be a marriage in name only. For his trouble, she would be willing to pay. How much? If it’s a bit too much, could she pay
20 on the installment plan? If he wished . . . otherwise . . . Meanwhile He would look the other way.

How she found Carlito Zafra was another story, a much longer story, more confused and confusing. It was like a miracle, though. Her friend God could not have sent her to a better instrument to satisfy her need. That was not expressed well, but it
25 amounted to that, a need. Carlito was an instrument necessary for her good. And, as it turned out, a not too unwilling instrument.

“We were married the day before the week was over,” Mrs. Zafra said. “And I’ve been in this country ever since. And no regrets.”

30 They lived well and simply, a country life. True, they were childless, but both of them were helping relatives in the Philippines, sending them money and goods marked Made in USA.

“Lately, however, some of the goods we’ve been sending do not arrive intact. Do you know that some of the good quality material we send never reach our relatives? It’s frustrating.”

“We got lotsa thieves between here and there,” Alipio said, but his mind seemed to be on something else.

“And I was able to send for Monica. From the snapshots she sent us she seemed to be getting thinner and more sickly, teaching in the barrio. And she wanted so much to come here.”

“Seniang was like you also, hiding from immigration. I thank God for her,” Alipio told Mrs. Zafra in such a low voice he could hardly be heard.

The sisters pretended they didn’t know, but they knew practically everything about him. Alipio appeared tired, pensive, and eager to talk so they listened.

“She went to my apartment and said, without any hesitation, marry me and I’ll take care of you. She was thin then and I thought what she said was funny, the others had been matching us, you know, but I was not really interested. I believe marriage means children. And if you cannot produce children, why get married? Besides, I had ugly experiences, bad moments. When I first arrived in the States, here in Frisco, I was young and there were lotsa blondies hanging around on

Kearny Street. It was easy. But I wanted a family and they didn’t. None of ’em. So what the heck, I said.”

Alipio realized that Seniang was not joking. She had to get married to an American citizen otherwise she would be deported. At that time, Alipio was beginning to feel the disadvantages of living alone. There was too much time in his hands. How he hated himself for some of the things he did. He believed that if he was married, he would be more sensible with his time and his money. He would be happier and live long. So when Seniang showed that she was serious, he agreed to marry her. It was not to be in name only. He wanted a woman. He liked her so much he would have proposed himself had he suspected that he had a chance. She was hard working, decent, and in those days, rather slim.

“Like Monica,” he said.

“Oh, I’m thin,” Monica protested, blushing deeply, “I’m all bones.”

“Monica is my only sister. We have no brother,” Mrs. Zafra said, adding more items to her sister’s vita.

“Look,” Monica said, “I finished everything on my plate. I’ve never tasted sardines this good. Especially the way you eat them. I’m afraid I’ve eaten up your lunch. This is my first full meal. And I thought I’ve lost my appetite already.”

The words came out in a rush. It seemed she didn't want to stop and she paused only because she didn't know what else to say. She moved about, gaily and at ease, perfectly at home. Alipio watched her with a bemused look in his face as she gathered the dishes and brought them to the kitchen sink. When Alipio heard the water
5 running, he stood up, without much effort this time, and walked to her saying, "Don't bother. I got all the time to do that. You got to leave me something to do. Come, perhaps your sister wants another cup of coffee."

Mrs. Zafra had not moved from her seat. She was watching the two argue about the dishes. When she heard Alipio mention coffee, she said, "No, no more, thanks. I've
10 drunk enough to keep me awake all week."

"Well, I'm going to wash them myself later," Monica was saying as she walked back to the table, Alipio close behind her.

"You're an excellent host, Alipio." Mrs. Zafra spoke in a tone like a reading from a citation on a certificate of merit or something. "And to two complete strangers at
15 that. You're a good man."

"But you're not strangers. Carlito is my friend. We were young together in this country. And that's something, you know. There are lotsa guys like us here. Old-timers, o.t.'s, they call us. Permanent residents. US. Citizens. We all gonna be buried
20 here." He appeared to be thinking deeply as he added, "But what's wrong about that?"

The sisters ignored the question. The old man was talking to himself.

"What's wrong is to be dishonest. Earn a living with both hands, not afraid of any kind of work, that's the best good. No other way. Yes, everything for convenience, why not? That's frankly honest. No pretend. Love comes in the afterwards. When it
25 comes. If it comes."

Mrs. Zafra chuckled, saying, "Ah, you're a romantic, Alipio. I must ask Carlito about you. You seem to know so much about him. I bet you were quite a . . ." she paused because what she wanted to say was "rooster," but she might give the impression of over-familiarity.

Alipio interrupted her, saying, "Ask him, he will say yes, I'm a romantic." His voice held a vibrance that was a surprise and a revelation to the visitors. He gestured as he talked, puckering his mouth every now and then, obviously to keep his dentures from slipping out. "What do you think? We were young, why not? We wowed 'em with our gallantry, with our cooking. Boy those dames never seen anything like us. Also,
35 we were fools, most of us, anyway. Fools on fire."

Mrs. Zafra clapped her hands. Monica was smiling.

“Ah, but that fire’s gone. Only the fool’s left now,” Alipio said, weakly. His voice was low and he looked tired as he passed both hands across his face. Then he raised his head. The listening look came back to his face. When he spoke, his voice shook a little.

“Many times I wonder where are the others. Where are you? Speak to me. And I think they’re wondering the same, asking the same, so I say, I’m here, your friend Alipio Palma, my leg is broken, the wife she’s dead, but I’m okay. Are you okay also? The dead they can hear even if they don’t answer. The alive don’t answer. But I know. I feel. Some okay, some not. They old now, all of us, who were very young. All over the United States of America. All over the world . . .”

Abruptly, he turned to Mrs. Zafra, saying, “So. You and Carlito. But Carlito, he never had fire.”

“How true, how very very true,” Mrs. Zafra laughed. “It would burn him. Can’t stand it. Not Carlito. But he’s a good man, I can tell you that.”

“No question. Dabest,” Alipio conceded.

Monica remained silent, but her eyes followed every move Alipio made, straying no further than the reach of his arms as he gestured to help make clear the intensity of his feeling.

“I’m sure you still got some of that fire,” Mrs. Zafra said.

Monica gasped, but she recovered quickly. Again a rush of words came from her lips as if they had been there all the time waiting for what her sister had said that touched off the torrent of words. Her eyes shone as in a fever as she talked.

“I don’t know Carlito very well. I’ve not been with them very long, but from what you say, from the way you talk, from what I see, the two of you are very different.”

“Oh, maybe not,” Alipio said, trying to protest, but Monica went on.

“You have strength, Mr. Palma. Strength of character. Strength in your belief in God. I admire that in a man, in a human being. Look at you. Alone. This huge table. Don’t you find it too big sometimes?” Monica paused perhaps to allow her meaning to sink into Alipio’s consciousness, as she fixed her eyes on him.

“No, not really. I don’t eat at this table. I eat in the kitchen,” Alipio said.

Mrs. Zafra was going to say something, but she held back. Monica was talking again.

5 “But it must be hard, that you cannot deny. Living from day to day. Alone. On what? Memories? Cabinets and a refrigerator full of food? I repeat, I admire you, sir. You’ve found your place. You’re home safe. And at peace.” She paused again this time to sweep back the strand of hair that had fallen on her brow.

Alipio had a drugged look. He seemed to have lost the drift of her speech. What was she talking about? Groceries? Baseball? He was going to say, you like baseball also? You like tuna? I have all kinds of fish. Get them at bargain price. But, obviously, it was not the proper thing to say.

10 “Well, I guess, one gets used to anything. Even loneliness,” Monica said in a listless, dispirited tone, all the fever in her voice gone.

“God dictates,” Alipio said, feeling he had found his way again and he was now on the right track. What a girl. If she had only a little more flesh. And color.

15 Monica leaned back on her chair, exhausted. Mrs. Zafra was staring at her in disbelief, in grievous disappointment. Her eyes seemed to say, what happened, you were going great, what suddenly hit you that you had to stop, give up, defeated? Monica shook her head in a gesture that quite clearly said, no, I can’t do it, I can’t anymore, I give up.

20 Their eyes kept up a show, a deaf-mute dialogue. Mrs. Zafra: Just when everything was going on fine, you quit. We’ve reached this far and you quit. I could have done it my way, directly, honestly. Not that what you were doing was dishonest, you were great, and now look at that dumb expression in your eyes. Monica: I can’t. I can’t anymore. But I tried. It’s too much.

“How long have you been in the States?” Alipio asked Monica.

25 “For almost a year now!” Mrs. Zafra screamed and Alipio was visibly shaken, but she didn’t care. This was the right moment. She would take it from here whether Monica went along with her or not. She was going to do it her way. “How long exactly, let’s see. Moni, when did you get your last extension?”

30 “Extension?” Alipio repeated the word. It had such a familiar ring like “visa” or “social security,” it broke into his consciousness like a touch from Seniang’s fingers. It was quite intimate. “You mean . . .

“That’s right. She’s here as a temporary visitor. As a matter of fact, she came on a tourist visa. Carlito and I sponsored her coming, filed all the necessary papers, and

everything would have been fine, but she couldn't wait. She had to come here as a tourist. Now she's in trouble."

"What trouble?" Alipio asked.

"She has to go back to the Philippines. She can't stay here any longer."

5 "I have only two days left," Monica said, her head in her hands. "And I don't want to go back."

Alipio glanced at the wall clock. It was past three. They had been talking for hours. It was visas right from the start. Marriages. The long years and the o.t.'s Now it was visas again. Were his ears playing a game? They might as well as they did sometimes,
10 but his eyes surely were not. He could see this woman very plainly, sobbing on the table. Boy, she was in big trouble. Visas. Immigration. Boy, oh, boy! He knew all about that. His gleaming dentures showed a crooked smile. He turned to Mrs. Zafra.

"Did you come here," he began, but Mrs. Zafra interrupted him.

15 "Yes, Alipio. Forgive us. As soon as we arrived, I wanted to tell you without much talk, I wanted to say, 'I must tell you why we're here. I've heard about you. Not only from Carlito, but from other Filipinos who know you, how you're living here in San Francisco alone, a widower, and we heard of the accident, your stay in the hospital, when you were released, everything. Here's my sister, a teacher in the Philippines, never married, worried to death because she's being deported unless something
20 turned up like she could marry a US. citizen, like I did, like your late wife Seniang, like many others have done, are doing in this exact moment, who can say? Now look at her, she's good, religious, any arrangement you wish, she'd accept it.' But I didn't have a chance to say it. You welcomed us like old friends, relatives. Later every time I began to say something about why we came, she interrupted me. I was afraid she had
25 changed her mind and then she began to talk, then stopped without finishing what she really wanted to say, that is, why we came to see you, and so forth."

"No, no!" Monica cried, raising her head, her eyes red from weeping, her face damp with tears. "You're such a good man. We couldn't do this to you. We're wrong. We started wrong. We should've been more honest, but I was ashamed. I was afraid.
30 Let's go! let's go!"

"Where you going?" Alipio asked.

"Anywhere," Monica answered. "Forgive us. Forgive me, Mister. Alipio, please."

“What’s to forgive? Don’t go. We have dinner. But first, let’s have merienda. I take merienda. You do also, don’t you? And I don’t mean snacks like the Americans.”

The sisters exchanged glances, their eyes chattering away.

5 Alipio chuckled. He wanted to say, talk of lightning striking same fellow twice, but thought better of it. A bad thing to say. Seniang was not lightning. At times only. Mostly his fault. And this girl Monica . . . Moni? Nice name also. How can this one be lightning?

10 Mrs. Zafra picked up her purse and before anyone could stop her, she was opening the door. “Where’s the nearest grocery store around here?” she asked, but she didn’t wait for an answer.

“Come back, come back here, we got lotsa food,” Alipio called after her, but he might just as well have been calling the Pacific Ocean.

15 Mrs. Zafra took time although a supermarket was only a few blocks away. When she returned, her arms were full of groceries in paper bags. Alipio and Monica met her on the porch.

“Comasta?” she asked, speaking in the dialect for the first time as Monica relieved her of her load. The one word question seemed to mean much more than “How are you?” or “How has it been?”

20 Alipio replied in English. “God dictates,” he said, his dentures sounding faintly as he smacked his lips, but he was not looking at the foodstuff in the paper bags Monica was carrying. His eyes were on her legs, in the direction she was taking. She knew where the kitchen was, of course. He just wanted to be sure she won’t lose her way. Like him. On his way to the kitchen, sometimes he found himself in the bedroom. Lotsa things happened to men his age.

25