

As soon as Fil woke up, he noticed a whiteness outside, quite unusual for the
5 November mornings they had been having. That fall, Chicago was sandman's town,
sleepy valley, drowsy gray, slumbrous mistiness from sunup till noon when the
clouds drifted away in cauliflower clusters and suddenly it was evening. The lights
shone on the avenues like soiled lamps centuries old and the skyscrapers became
monsters with a thousand sore eyes. Now there was a brightness in the air and Fil
10 knew what it was and he shouted, "Snow! It's snowing!"

Tony, who slept in the adjoining room, was awakened.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's snowing," Fil said, smiling to himself as if he had ordered this and was satisfied
with the prompt delivery. "Oh, they'll love this, they'll love this."

15 "Who'll love that?" Tony asked, his voice raised in annoyance.

"The dancers, of course," Fil answered. "They're arriving today. Maybe they've
already arrived. They'll walk in the snow and love it. Their first snow, I'm sure."

"How do you know it wasn't snowing in New York while they were there?" Tony
asked.

20 "Snow in New York in early November?" Fil said. "Are you crazy?"

"Who's crazy?" Tony replied. "Ever since you heard of those dancers from the
Philippines, you've been acting nuts. Loco. As if they're coming here just for you."

Tony chuckled. Hearing him, Fil blushed, realizing that he had, indeed, been acting
too eager, but Tony had said it. It felt that way—as if the dancers were coming here
25 only for him.

Filemon Acayan, Filipino, was fifty, a U.S. citizen. He was a corporal in the U.S.
Army, training at San Luis Obispo, on the day he was discharged honorably, in 1945.
A few months later, he got his citizenship papers. Thousands of them, smart and
small in their uniforms, stood at attention in drill formation, in the scalding sun, and
30 pledged allegiance to the flag and the republic for which it stands. Soon after he got

back to work. To a new citizen, work meant many places and many ways: factories and hotels, waiter and cook. A timeless drifting; once he tended a rose garden and took care of a hundred-year-old veteran of a border war. As a menial in a hospital in Cook County, all day he handled filth and gore. He came home smelling of surgical soap and disinfectant. In the hospital, he took charge of a row of bottles on a shelf, each bottle containing a stage of the human embryo in preservatives, from the lizard-like fetus of a few days, through the newly born infant, with its position unchanged, cold and cowering and afraid. He had nightmares through the years of himself inside a bottle. That was long ago. Now he had a more pleasant job as special policeman in the post office.

He was a few years younger than Tony—Antonio Bataller, a retired Pullman porter—but he looked older in spite of the fact that Tony had been bedridden most of the time for the last two years, suffering from a kind of wasting disease that had frustrated doctors. All over Tony's body, a gradual peeling was taking place. At first, he thought it was merely *tinia flava*, a skin disease common among adolescents in the Philippines. It had started around the neck and had spread to his extremities. His face looked as if it was healing from severe burns. Nevertheless, it was a young face, much younger than Fil's, which had never looked young.

"I'm becoming a white man," Tony had said once, chuckling softly.

It was the same chuckle Fil seemed to have heard now, only this time it sounded derisive, insulting.

Fil said, "I know who's nuts. It's the sick guy with the sick thoughts. You don't care for nothing but your pain, your imaginary pain."

"You're the imagining fellow. I got the real thing," Tony shouted from the room. He believed he had something worse than the whiteness spreading on his skin. There was a pain in his insides, like dull scissors scraping his intestines. Angrily, he added, "What for I got retired?"

"You're old, man, old, that's what, and sick, yes, but not cancer," Fil said turning towards the snow-filled sky. He pressed his face against the glass window. There's about an inch now on the ground, he thought, maybe more.

Tony came out of his room looking as if he had not slept all night. "I know what I got," he said, as if it were an honor and a privilege to die of cancer and Fil was trying to deprive him of it. "Never a pain like this. One day, I'm just gonna die."

"Naturally. Who says you won't?" Fil argued, thinking how wonderful it would be if he could join the company of dancers from the Philippines, show them around, walk

with them in the snow, watch their eyes as they stared about them, answer their questions, tell them everything they wanted to know about the changing seasons in this strange land. They would pick up fistfuls of snow, crunch it in their fingers or shove it into their mouths. He had done just that the first time, long, long ago, and it
5 had reminded him of the grated ice the Chinese sold near the town plaza where he had played *tatching* with an older brother who later drowned in a squall. How his mother had grieved over that death, she who had not cried too much when his father died, a broken man. Now they were all gone, quick death after a storm, or lingeringly, in a season of drought, all, all of them he had loved.

10 He continued, "All of us will die. One day. A medium bomb marked Chicago and this whole dump is *tapus*, finished. Who'll escape then?"

"Maybe your dancers will," Tony answered, now watching the snow himself.

"Of course, they will," Fil retorted, his voice sounding like a big assurance that all the dancers would be safe in his care. "The bombs won't be falling on this night. And,
15 when the dancers are back in the Philippines . . ."

He paused, as if he was no longer sure of what he was going to say. "But maybe, even in the Philippines the bombs gonna fall, no?" he said, gazing sadly at the falling snow.

"What's that to you?" Tony replied. "You got no more folks ove'der, right? I know it's nothing to me. I'll be dead before that."

20 "Let's talk about something nice," Fil said, the sadness spreading on his face as he tried to smile. "Tell me, how will I talk, how am I gonna introduce myself?"

He would go ahead with his plans, introduce himself to the dancers and volunteer to take them sight-seeing. His car was clean and ready for his guests. He had soaped the ashtrays, dusted off the floor boards and thrown away the old mats, replacing them
25 with new plastic throw rugs. He had got himself soaking wet while spraying the car, humming, as he worked, faintly remembered tunes from the old country.

Fil shook his head as he waited for Tony to say something. "Gosh, I wish I had your looks, even with those white spots, then I could face every one of them," he said, "but this mug."

30 "That's the important thing, your mug. It's your calling card. It says, Filipino. Countryman," Tony said.

"You're not fooling me, friend," Fil said. "This mug says, Ugly Filipino. It says, old-timer, *muchacho*. It says Pinoy, *bejo*."

For Fil, time was the villain. In the beginning, the words he often heard were: too young, too young; but all of a sudden, too young became too old, too late. What had happened in between? A weariness, a mist covering all things. You don't have to look at your face in a mirror to know that you are old, suddenly old, grown useless for a lot of things and too late for all the dreams you had wrapped up well against a day of need.

"It also says sucker," Tony said. "What for you want to invite them? Here? Aren't you ashamed of this hole?"

"It's not a palace, I know," Fil answered, "but who wants a palace when they can have the most delicious *adobo* here and the best stuffed chicken . . . yum . . yum . . ."

Tony was angry. "Yum, yum, you're nuts," he said, "plain and simple loco. What for you want to spend? You've been living on loose change all your life and now on a treasury warrant so small and full of holes, still you want to spend for these dancing kids who don't know you and won't even send you a card afterwards."

"Never mind the cards," Fil answered. "Who wants cards? But don't you see, they'll be happy; and then, you know what? I'm going to keep their voices, their words and their singing and their laughter in my magic sound mirror."

He had a portable tape recorder and a stack of recordings, patiently labeled, songs and speeches. The songs were in English, but most of the speeches were in the dialect, debates between him and Tony. It was evident Tony was the better speaker of the two in English, but in the dialect, Fil showed greater mastery. His style, however, was florid, sentimental, poetic.

Without telling Tony, he had experimented on recording sounds, like the way a bed creaked, doors opening and closing, rain or sleet tapping on the window panes, footsteps through the corridor. He played all the sounds back and tried to recall how it was on the day or night the sounds had been recorded. Did they bring back the moment? He was beginning to think that they did. He was learning to identify each of the sounds with a particular mood or fact. Sometimes, like today, he wished that there was a way of keeping a record of silence because it was to him the richest sound, like snow falling. He wondered as he watched the snow blowing in the wind, what took care of that moment if memory didn't. Like time, memory was often a villain, a betrayer.

"Fall, snow, fall," he murmured and, turning to Tony, said, "As soon as they accept my invitation, I'll call you up. No, you don't have to do anything, but I'd want you to be here to meet them."

“I’m going out myself.” Tony said. “And I don’t know what time I’ll be back.” Then he added, “You’re not working today. Are you on leave?”

“For two days. While the dancers are here,” Fil said.

“It still don’t make sense to me,” Tony said. “But good luck, anyway.”

5 “Aren’t you going to see them tonight? Our reserved seats are right out in front, you know.”

“I know. But I’m not sure I can come.”

“What? You’re not sure?”

10 Fil could not believe it. Tony was indifferent. Something must be wrong with him. He looked at him closely, saying nothing.

“I want to, but I’m sick, Fil. I tell you, I’m not feeling so good. My doctor will know today. He’ll tell me,” Tony said.

“What will he tell you?”

“How do I know?”

15 “I mean, what’s he trying to find out?”

“If it’s cancer,” Tony said. Without saying another word, he went straight back to his room.

20 Fil remembered those times, at night, when Tony kept him awake with his moaning. When he called out to him, asking, “Tony, what’s the matter?” his sighs ceased for a while, but afterwards, Tony screamed, deadening his cries with a pillow against his mouth. When Fil rushed to his side, Tony drove him away. Or he curled up in the bedsheets like a big infant suddenly hushed in its crying. The next day, he would look all right. When Fil asked him about the previous night, he would reply, “I was dying,” but it sounded more like disgust over a nameless annoyance.

25 Fil had misgivings, too, about the whiteness spreading on Tony’s skin. He had heard of leprosy. Every time he thought of that dreaded disease. he felt tears in his eyes. In all the years he had been in America, he had not had a friend until he met Tony whom he liked immediately and, in a way, worshipped, for all the things the man had which Fil knew he himself lacked.

They had shared a lot together. They made merry on Christmas, sometimes got drunk and became loud. Fil recited poems in the dialect and praised himself. Tony fell to giggling and cursed all the railroad companies of America. But last Christmas, they hadn't gotten drunk. They hadn't even talked to each other on Christmas day. Soon,
5 it would be Christmas again.

The snow was still falling.

"Well, I'll be seeing you," Fil said, getting ready to leave. "Try to be home on time. I shall invite the dancers for luncheon or dinner maybe, tomorrow. But tonight, let's go to the theater together, ha?"

10 "I'll try," Tony answered, adding after a pause, "Oh, Fil, I can't find my boots. May I wear yours?" His voice sounded strong and healthy.

"Sure, sure!" Fil answered. He didn't need boots. He loved to walk in the snow.

The air outside felt good. Fil lifted his face to the sky and closed his eyes as the snow and a wet wind drenched his face. He stood that way for some time, crying, more,
15 more! to himself, drunk with snow and coolness. His car was parked a block away. As he walked towards it, he plowed into the snow with one foot and studied the scar he made, a hideous shape among perfect footmarks. He felt strong as his lungs filled with the cold air, as if just now it did not matter too much that he was the way he looked and his English the way it was. But perhaps, he could talk to the dancers in his
20 dialect. Why not?

A heavy frosting of snow covered his car and as he wiped it off with his bare hands, he felt light and young, like a child at play, and once again, he raised his face to the sky and licked the flakes, cold and tasteless on his tongue.

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25 When Fil arrived at the Hamilton, it seemed to him the Philippine dancers had taken over the hotel. They were all over the lobby on the mezzanine, talking in groups animatedly, their teeth sparkling as they laughed, their eyes disappearing in mere slits of light. Some of the girls wore their black hair long. For a moment, the sight seemed too much for him who had all but forgotten how beautiful Philippine girls
30 were. He wanted to look away, but their loveliness held him. He must do something, close his eyes perhaps. As he did so, their laughter came to him like a breeze murmurous with sounds native to his land.

Later, he tried to relax, to appear inconspicuous. True, they were all very young, but there were a few elderly men and women who must have been their chaperons or

well-wishers like him. He would smile at everyone who happened to look his way. Most of them smiled back, or rather, seemed to smile, but it was quick, without recognition, and might not have been for him but for someone else near or behind him.

- 5 His lips formed the words he was trying to phrase in his mind: *Ilocano ka? Bico? Anona, paisano? Comusta?* Or should he introduce himself? How? For what he wanted to say, the words didn't come too easily, they were unfamiliar, they stumbled and broke on his lips into a jumble of incoherence.

- 10 Suddenly, he felt as if he was in the center of a group where he was not welcome. All the things he had been trying to hide now showed: the age in his face, his horny hands. He knew it the instant he wanted to shake hands with the first boy who had drawn close to him, smiling and friendly. Fil put his hands in his pocket.

- 15 Now he wished Tony had been with him. Tony would know what to do. He would charm these young people with his smile and his learned words. Fil wanted to leave, but he seemed caught up in the tangle of moving bodies that merged and broke in a fluid strangle hold. Everybody was talking, mostly in English. Once in a while he heard exclamations in the dialect right out of the past, conjuring up playtime, long shadows of evening on the plaza, barrio fiestas, *misa de gallo*.

- 20 Time was passing and he had yet to talk to someone. Suppose he stood on a chair and addressed them in the manner of his flamboyant speeches recorded in his magic sound mirror?

- 25 "Beloved countrymen, lovely children of the Pearl of the Orient Seas, listen to me. I'm Fil Acayan. I've come to volunteer my services. I'm yours to command. Your servant. Tell me where you wish to go, what you want to see in Chicago. I know every foot of the lakeshore drive, all the gardens and the parks, the museums, the huge department stores, the planetarium. Let me be your guide. That's what I'm offering you, a free tour of Chicago, and finally, dinner at my apartment on West Sheridan Road—pork *adobo* and chicken *relleno*, name your dish. How about it, *paisanos?*"

- 30 No. That would be a foolish thing to do. They would laugh at him. He felt a dryness in his throat. He was sweating. As he wiped his face with a handkerchief, he bumped against a slim, short girl who quite gracefully stepped aside, and for a moment he thought he would swoon in the perfume that enveloped him. It was fragrance long forgotten, essence of *camia*, of *ilang-ilang*, and *dama de noche*.

- 35 Two boys with sleek, pomaded hair were sitting near an empty chair. He sat down and said in the dialect, "May I invite you to my apartment?" The boys stood up,

saying, "Excuse us, please," and walked away. He mopped his brow, but instead of getting discouraged, he grew bolder as though he had moved one step beyond shame. Approaching another group, he repeated his invitation, and a girl with a mole on her upper lip, said, "Thank you, but we have no time." As he turned towards another group, he felt their eyes on his back. Another boy drifted towards him, but as soon as he began to speak, the boy said, "Pardon, please," and moved away.

They were always moving away. As if by common consent, they had decided to avoid him, ignore his presence. Perhaps it was not their fault. They must have been instructed to do so. Or was it his looks that kept them away? The thought was a sharpness inside him.

After a while, as he wandered about the mezzanine, among the dancers, but alone, he noticed that they had begun to leave. Some had crowded noisily into the two elevators. He followed the others going down the stairs. Through the glass doors, he saw them getting into a bus parked beside the subway entrance on Dearborn.

The snow had stopped falling; it was melting fast in the sun and turning into slush.

As he moved about aimlessly, he felt someone touch him on the sleeve. It was one of the dancers, a mere boy, tall and thin, who was saying, "Excuse, please." Fil realized he was in the way between another boy with a camera and a group posing in front of the hotel.

"Sorry," Fil said, jumping away awkwardly.

The crowd burst out laughing.

Then everything became a blur in his eyes, a moving picture out of focus, but gradually the figures cleared, there was mud on the pavement on which the dancers stood posing, and the sun threw shadows at their feet.

Let them have fun, he said to himself, they're young and away from home. I have no business messing up their schedule, forcing my company on them.

He watched the dancers till the last of them was on the bus. The voices came to him, above the traffic sounds. They waved their hands and smiled towards him as the bus started. Fil raised his hand to wave back, but stopped quickly, aborting the gesture.

He turned to look behind him at whomever the dancers were waving their hands to. There was no one there except his own reflection in the glass door, a double exposure of himself and a giant plant with its thorny branches around him like arms in a loving embrace.

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Even before he opened the door to their apartment, Fil knew that Tony had not yet arrived. There were no boots outside on the landing. Somehow he felt relieved, for until then he did not know how he was going to explain his failure.

5 From the hotel, he had driven around, cruised by the lakeshore drive, hoping he would see the dancers somewhere, in a park perhaps, taking pictures of the mist over the lake and the last gold on the trees now wet with melted snow, or on some picnic grounds, near a bubbling fountain. Still taking pictures of themselves against a background of Chicago's gray and dirty skyscrapers. He slowed down every time he
10 saw a crowd, but the dancers were nowhere along his way. Perhaps they had gone to the theater to rehearse. He turned back before reaching Evanston.

He felt weak, not hungry. Just the same, he ate, warming up some left-over food. The rice was cold, but the soup was hot and tasty. While he ate, he listened for footfalls.

15 Afterwards, he lay down on the sofa and a weariness came over him, but he tried hard not to sleep. As he stared at the ceiling, he felt like floating away, but he kept his eyes open, willing himself hard to remain awake. He wanted to explain everything to Tony when he arrived. But soon his eyes closed against a weary will too tired and weak to fight back sleep—and then there were voices. Tony was in the room, eager to tell his own bit of news.

20 "I've discovered a new way of keeping afloat," he was saying.

"Who wants to keep afloat?" Fil asked.

"Just in case. In a shipwreck, for example," Tony said.

"Never mind shipwrecks. I must tell you about the dancers," Fil said.

25 "But this is important," Tony insisted. "This way, you can keep floating indefinitely."

"What for indefinitely?" Fil asked.

"Say in a ship . . . I mean, in an emergency, you're stranded without help in the middle of the Pacific or the Atlantic, you must keep floating till help comes . . ." Tony explained.

30 "More better," Fil said, "find a way to reach shore before the sharks smells you. You discover that."

"I will," Tony said, without eagerness, as though certain that there was no such way, that, after all, his discovery was worthless.

"Now you listen to me," Fil said, sitting up abruptly. As he talked in the dialect, Tony listened with increasing apathy.

5 "There they were." Fil began, his tone taking on the orator's pitch, "who could have been my children if I had not left home—or yours, Tony. They gazed around them with wonder, smiling at me, answering my questions, but grudgingly, edging away as if to be near me were wrong, a violation in their rule book. But it could be that every time I opened my mouth, I gave myself away. I talked in the dialect, Ilocano, Tagalog,
10 Bicol, but no one listened. They avoided me. They had been briefed too well: Do not talk to strangers. Ignore their invitations. Be extra careful in the big cities like New York and Chicago, beware of the old-timers, the Pinoys. Most of them are bums. Keep away from them. Be on the safe side—stick together, entertain only those who have been introduced to you properly.

15 "I'm sure they had such instructions, safety measures, they must have called them. What then could I have done, scream out my good intentions, prove my harmlessness and my love for them by beating my breast? Oh, but I loved them. You see, I was like them once. I, too, was nimble with my feet, graceful with my hands; and I had the tongue of a poet. Ask the village girls and the envious boys from the city—but first
20 you have to find them. After these many years, it won't be easy. You'll have to search every suffering face in the village gloom for a hint of youth and beauty or go where the graveyards are and the tombs under the lime trees. One such face . . . oh, God, what am I saying?

"All I wanted was to talk to them, guide them around Chicago, spend money on them
25 so that they would have something special to remember about us here when they return to our country. They would tell their folks: We met a kind, old man, who took us to his apartment. It was not much of a place. It was old—like him. When we sat on the sofa in the living room, the bottom sank heavily, the broken springs touching the floor. But what a cook that man was! And how kind! We never thought that rice and
30 *adobo* could be that delicious. And the chicken *relleno*! When someone asked what the stuffing was—we had never tasted anything like it—he smiled saying, 'From heaven's supermarket,' touching his head and pressing his heart like a clown as if heaven were there. He had his tape recorder which he called a magic sound mirror, and he had all of us record our voices. Say anything in the dialect, sing, if you please,
35 our *kundiman*, please, he said, his eyes pleading, too. Oh, we had fun listening to the playback. When you're gone, the old man said, I shall listen to your voices with my eyes closed and you'll be here again and I won't ever be alone, no, not anymore, after

this. We wanted to cry, but he looked very funny, so we laughed and he laughed with us.

“But, Tony, they would not come. They thanked me, but they said they had no time. Others said nothing. They looked through me. I didn’t exist. Or worse, I was
5 unclean. *Basura*. Garbage. They were ashamed of me. How could I be Filipino?”

The memory, distinctly recalled, was a rock on his breast. He gasped for breath.

“Now, let me teach you how to keep afloat,” Tony said, but it was not Tony’s voice.

Fil was alone and gasping for air. His eyes opened slowly till he began to breathe more easily. The sky outside was gray. He looked at his watch—a quarter past five. The
10 show would begin at eight. There was time. Perhaps Tony would be home soon.

The apartment was warming up. The radiators sounded full of scampering rats. He had a recording of that in his sound mirror.

Fil smiled. He had an idea. He would take the sound mirror to the theater, take his seat close to the stage, and make tape recordings of the singing and the dances.

15 Now he was wide-awake and somehow pleased with himself. The more he thought of the idea, the better he felt. If Tony showed up now . . . He sat up, listening. The radiators were quiet. There were no footfalls, no sound of a key turning.

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20 Late that night, back from the theater, Fil knew at once that Tony was back. The boots were outside the door. He, too, must be tired, and should not be disturbed.

He was careful not to make any noise. As he turned on the floor lamp, he thought that perhaps Tony was awake and waiting for him. They would listen together to a playback of the dances and the songs Tony had missed. Then he would tell Tony what happened that day, repeating part of the dream.

25 From Tony’s bedroom came the regular breathing of a man sound asleep. To be sure, he looked into the room and in the half-darkness, Tony’s head showed darkly, deep in a pillow, on its side, his knees bent, almost touching the clasped hands under his chin, an oversized fetus in the last bottle. Fil shut the door between them and went over to the portable. Now. He turned it on to low. At first nothing but static and odd
30 sounds came through, but soon after there was the patter of feet to the rhythm of a familiar melody.

All the beautiful boys and girls were in the room now, dancing and singing. A boy and a girl sat on the floor holding two bamboo poles by their ends flat on the floor, clapping them together, then apart, and pounding them on the boards, while dancers swayed and balanced their lithe forms, dipping their bare brown legs in and out of the clapping bamboos, the pace gradually increasing into a fury of wood on wood in a counterpoint of panic among the dancers and in a harmonious flurry of toes and ankles escaping certain pain—crushed bones, and bruised flesh, and humiliation. Other dances followed, accompanied by songs and live with the sounds of life and death in the old country; Igorot natives in G-strings walking down a mountainside; peasants climbing up a hill on a rainy day; neighbors moving a house, their sturdy legs showing under a moving roof; lovers at Lent hiding their passion among wild hedges, far from the crowded chapel; a distant gong sounding off a summons either to a feast or a wake. And finally, prolonged ovation, thunderous, wave upon wave . . .

“Turn that thing off!” Tony’s voice was sharp above the echoes of the gongs and the applause settling into silence.

Fil switched off the dial and in the sudden stillness, the voices turned into faces, familiar and near, like gesture and touch that stayed on even as the memory withdrew, bowing out, as it were, in a graceful exit, saying, thank you, thank you, before a ghostly audience that clapped hands in silence and stomped their feet in a sucking emptiness. He wanted to join the finale, such as it was, pretend that the curtain call included him, and attempt a shamefaced imitation of a graceful adieu, but he was stiff and old, incapable of grace; but he said, thank you, thank you, his voice sincere and contrite, grateful for the other voices and the sound of singing and the memory.

“Oh, my God . . .” the man in the other room cried, followed by a moan of such anguish that Fil fell on his knees, covering the sound mirror with his hands to muffle the sounds that had started again, it seemed to him, even after he had turned it off.

Then he remembered.

“Tony, what did the doctor say? What did he say?” he shouted and listened, holding his breath, no longer able to tell at the moment who had truly waited all day for the final sentence.

There was no answer. Meanwhile, under his hands, there was a flutter of wings, a shudder of gongs. What was Tony saying? That was his voice, no? Fil wanted to hear, he must know. He switched dials on and off, again and again, pressing buttons. Suddenly, he didn’t know what to do. The spools were live, they kept turning. His arms went around the machine, his chest pressing down on the spools. In the quick silence, Tony’s voice came clear.

“So they didn’t come after all?”

“Tony, what did the doctor say?” Fil asked, straining hard to hear.

“I knew they wouldn’t come. But that’s okay. The apartment is old anyhow. And it smells of death.”

5 “How you talk. In this country, there’s a cure for everything.”

“I guess we can’t complain. We had it good here all the time. Most of the time, anyway.”

“I wish, though, they had come. I could . . .”

10 “Yes, they could have. They didn’t have to see me, but I could have seen them. I have seen their pictures, but what do they really look like?”

“Tony, they’re beautiful, all of them, but especially the girls. Their complexion, their grace, their eyes, they were what we call talking eyes, they say things to you. And the scent of them!”

15 There was a sigh from the room, soft, hardly like a sigh. A louder, grating sound, almost under his hands that had relaxed their hold, called his attention. The sound mirror had kept going, the tape was fast unravelling.

“Oh, no!” he screamed, noticing that somehow, he had pushed the eraser.

20 Frantically, he tried to rewind and play back the sounds and the music, but there was nothing now but the dull creaking of the tape on the spool and meaningless sounds that somehow had not been erased, the thud of dancing feet, a quick clapping of hands, alien voices and words: in this country . . . everything . . . all of them . . . talking eyes . . . and the scent . . . a fading away into nothingness, till about the end when there was a screaming, senseless kind of finale detached from the body of a song in the background, drums and sticks and the tolling of a bell.

25 “Tony! Tony!” Fil cried, looking towards the sick man’s room, “I’ve lost them all.”

Biting his lips, Fil turned towards the window, startled by the first light of dawn. He hadn’t realized till then the long night was over.