In My Stepfather's Language

Sooey Valencia

I.

"Is there guilt?" my brother Carlo asked me the afternoon we found out that our stepfather had died. After hours of being wordlessly still, I had finally broken down, sobbing into his shoulder. He smelled of smoke and ash, what the entire day had become. I gave him no answer as I pressed my ear to his chest and listened to the mourning drumbeats of his heart, half expecting them to stop at any minute. But they didn't and as he crushed his last cigarette butt into the ashtray, I stared at each of the butts that he had killed. Perhaps that was how he cried, I thought, by burning the weight of his tears with smoke and crushing his grief into an ashtray afterwards.

And all I could do was whimper weakly into his shoulder.

II.

"He's a good man, Bee!" my Aunt Zendy reasoned, giving me a pat on the shoulder. My brothers stared at the floor in disbelief, both wordless at the news: we would be moving to a country called Bahrain in two weeks to be with our mother. Worst, there was a new man in her life, as well as ours—a

stepfather. A Greek man, she said. An orthopedic surgeon. My tears started to fall at the words. Not one of those again, I thought. I had been around white coats all my life, and now I would have to be related to one. Another white coat.

"I don't want to go!" I whined, pounding my fists stubbornly, a blob of mucus dribbling onto my crumpled skirt.

"Your mother is happy," she sighed. "And it doesn't mean he's replacing your father. Your father will always be your father and will always love you. It's just that sometimes…" she let the sentence trail off, perhaps thinking that it was too early for any such conversation. We would hear the rest of it over and over when we were older.

"Imagine!" Aunt Zendy exclaimed after a short silence fell inside the living room. "You might even be sent to Greece for college! Your *Ates* and I could visit you there!" A glimmer of excitement lingered in her eyes. "You'd still be able to visit us in the summer and every Christmas, and if you want to stay longer… *aba, sige*!" she gave me a playful nudge. "O, ano? What say you?"

I shook my head and sniffed, my lips trembling.

"And he can help your sister with her walking," Aunt Zendy continued, turning her attention to my brothers.

At this, they both raised their heads, defeated. *Kuya* Billy, who always thought of others before he thought of himself, was the first to give in. His words came slowly. "Well, if he can help Curly, then… I guess… It's okay *na*. Yeah, *sige*. He can help Curly *naman*, eh. And mom's happy so…"

"Yeah. I… I guess he can help Curly. Pero *'di ba*…?" stammered *Kuya* Carlo, the oldest among us siblings, looking betrayed as he gave his hair a rough tousle. We could tell that he was more concerned about bigger things than a strange Greek man being able to help me. More mature things.

My aunt sighed, taking a long, deep sip from her can of Diet Coke as if to avoid having to answer. She pursed her lips and looked worriedly in the direction of my late cousin Kathy's picture sitting on the mini-altar. What else could she have told three confused children like us?

"I know this is hard for all of you, but give it a chance, okay?" she said, almost pleadingly. "Everyone deserves a chance. Who knows, you might even love him after all."

Kuya Carlo had begun to cry, slumping further into his chair.

Kuya Billy had turned red in the face and was breathing heavily into his t-shirt.

I had grown tired of crying and stared unblinkingly at the blue-and-white jars inside the glass cabinet across the sofa, the warmth of my cheeks against my palms.

III.

"So will I let the children fly tomorrow?" Aunt Zendy asked my mother over the phone one evening, two weeks later, as footage of the Gulf Air plane crash flashed on the television in the living room. All the programs on BBC had been reporting the same thing, and when we changed the channel, our eyes growing tired of the images of rescuers fishing dead bodies out of the sea and the announcements of the ever-rising death toll, we only found out that all the channels were broadcasting the same thing. My brothers and I cringed at the sight, our noses wrinkling as though the stench of death had leaped off the screen and into our nostrils. All three of us had our sweaty hands clasped tightly on our laps.

"*This must be serious*," I thought to myself, mouth half gaping. "*Very serious*."

I gave my aunt a pleading look, hoping that my puppy-dog eyes would convince her to postpone our flight.

"The little girl is crying," she tipped my mother, winking at me.

A pause, and then, "Your mother says your new Indian playmate Rameez is waiting for you," she reported. "A big, fat boy who loves to visit your mom everyday just to raid the fridge! The Godiva chocolates are almost gone *daw*, so you better hurry getting there! *Hay, naku!*" her mouth and eyes widened, feigning shock.

My eight-year-old fists clenched at the thought of another kid—an Indian boy at that—gobbling up my chocolates. For a moment I considered going, just to snatch them away from his greedy, chocolate-covered hands. While his finger-licking, fat figure filled my mind, Aunt Zendy had passed the phone to *Kuya* Billy, who was agreeing eagerly with something my mother was saying to him, the expression in his eyes changing from glum

and worried to excited and hopeful. "Yes mom… yes. I can't wait to go there *na*. *Yehey*! See you!" *Kuya* Carlo would go next, and, like *Kuya* Billy, would become filled with sudden enthusiasm at the thought of moving somewhere strange, something I still could not understand.

"Ah—um, yes sir! Yes. Looking forward to meeting you too, sir…" he was saying into the phone all of a sudden.

At this, I felt my face start to tighten, and my eyes began to blur with tears. Just as my brother held out the phone to me, I ran up to *Ate* Karen's tower, slamming the door shut.

The next day, no plane crashes, puppy-dog eyes, or crocodile tears could stop us from becoming unaccompanied minors on a flight bound for Bahrain. For nine hours we sat in cramped airplane seats watching sappy in-flight films that came with countless packets of greasy peanuts, leaving half-moons of yellow rice and heavily-spiced chicken uneaten, and trying to figure out how our stepfather looked until we fell into uncomfortable sleep.

The pilot's thickly-accented English roused us from sleep and soon, the passengers scrambled out of their seats, and pieces of luggage emerged from the overhead compartments. The man across us flashed a golden-toothed smile at our bewildered faces. "*O, ano pang hinihintay n'yo?*" he asked. "*Makabalik ng Pilipinas*?"

IV.

The strange Arabic letters all around the airport announced the absence of home. Heavily-bearded men wearing white robes and red-checkered headdresses covering their nearly bald heads were accompanied by scary-looking women draped in black that exposed only their eyes.

"*Their eyes are their only body parts*!" I thought, shivering as I clutched my copy of *Little Women* tighter to my chest, hoping that the thick volume would protect me from what I was seeing. If I held it tight enough, maybe I would be pulled into the world of the March sisters and would never have to see these strangers again, let alone my stepfather. I held it tighter and tighter, but nothing happened. Through my thick-rimmed, pink glasses, the world was moving fast.

My brothers, bags and boxes burdening their shoulders and hands, plunged into the sea of the unfamiliar, throaty language that would soon find its way into our mouths. Our eyes searched for our mother.

A woman on the other side of the glass wall waved her hands frantically to get our attention, her eyes beaming.

"It's mom!" *Kuya* Billy exclaimed, hurrying to meet her, *Kuya* Carlo trailing close behind. They both seemed lighter at the sight of her despite the heaviness of the baggage. I, on the other hand, forced out a smile and gave her a stiff wave.

It was not hard to notice how much time and living in a different country had changed my mother. She seemed more luminous. The wrinkles that our past life had imprinted on her had disappeared, and her smiles were wider and more genuine. She planted hard kisses on our cheeks, stamping them with lipstick. Even that had changed, I noted, curious at how such a place could transform her so drastically. Or perhaps it was something else, someone else. As if to answer my thoughts, a round Greek man with a hooked nose, shabby brown hair, shining almond eyes, and milk-white skin came to her side carrying a video camera. The bulge of his belly made it look as though he carried the entire world under his striped green shirt, the rest of it spreading into his denims, finally melting into his brown loafers.

"This is Uncle Kostas," my mother introduced. "Kos, these are my children, Carlo, Billy, and Curly," she gestured toward us.

"Hi, hi, hi," he greeted us, nodding eagerly, giving our hands firm shakes. "Kostas, Kostas, Kostas," he repeated his name three times.

My brothers smiled obligingly, almost sincerely, returning his firm grip.

Bending down, he looked at me, his beady eyes beaming with delight as he rested his warm, pillow-like hands on my cheeks.

"Hello, little girl!" he sang. I breathed deeply as he stretched my skin. "*Moro mou, moro mou, moro mou,*" he said through clenched teeth as he gave my cheeks light squeezes. He liked saying things in threes.

"Uncle," I mumbled, tears half-filling my eyes as I glowered at him.

Later, I would find out that he had just called me his baby.

V.

The ride home seemed longer than fifteen minutes. By the time the car stopped in front of a whitewashed building along Adliya Street in Manama, Bahrain's capital—I used to be so puzzled at the thought that such a tiny sand-engulfed island could still manage to squeeze in a capital—we all emerged from the car drenched in sweat, our heads pounding, our faces as red as tomatoes.

My new Uncle Kostas fanned under his armpits, where puddles had settled, darkening the green of his shirt. I snorted at the sight of the man, stopping only when he noticed me and began to shake his hips and whistle. Looking slightly rejected when I paid him no mind, he walked past me, digging into the pockets of his trousers for keys to the building's main door.

"*Pwede na siyang maging anak ni Kostas, mama! Magkamukha sila!*" Tita Tess, my mother's colleague at the Gulf Hotel, laughed that evening as she eyed me. She had come with her two sons, Jeck and Jude, to visit my mother and Uncle Kostas, and meet my brothers and me for the first time. The four boys had gotten along so well that within the next fifteen minutes of their meeting one another, the latest *Red Hot Chilli Peppers* album was already blaring from the stereo, and the door to our bedroom had closed. I was left there with the adults. I always was.

Tita Tess had been going on for hours about how beautiful she thought my eyelashes were ("*Ang ganda naman ng mga pilik-mata*!"), or how fair my skin was ("*Mestiza siya, mama!*"), or how my nose looked just like a Greek child's ("*Ang tangos ng ilong!*"). Uncle Kostas's laughter boomed out of his big body as my mother translated all this for him and Tita Tess took my face in her hands. "You look beautiful," she told me. "Just like your Daddy Kostas." At this, I turned away sharply, annoyed.

"*He is not my father,*" I thought as I imagined the wind's whistling, sand gathering into a storm.

VI.

In Bahrain, school began on Saturday. We came in the middle of the school year, hard questions welcoming the three of us.

STUDENT INFORMATION

Name: Zendy Victoria Sue G. Valencia
Grade: 3
Age: 8
Mother's Name: Caroline Valencia
Father's Name: ~~William Valencia~~
~~Kostas Karvelas~~
~~William Valencia~~
~~Kostas Karvelas~~

VII.

"You are not my father!"

"And I don't want to be your father! But tell me, huh? Who cooks your food? Who wakes up in the morning, five-thirty, just to cook you breakfast? Who teaches you your lessons? Who goes to your school to fight with the teachers when they don' want you to perform? Who reminds you to exercise every day? I try to be nice with you, but nooooo, you don' wan' it! With you, it always has to be the harsh way, you know? You're a brat, eh? Your father! *Re puste!* Tell me, what William did, eh? Tell me? What? Nothing!"

"*Kain ka lang ng kain, kaya ang taba taba mo eh!*"

"ENGLISH PLEASE!"

"*Wala akong pakialam! Mag-Tatagalog ako kung gusto kong mag-Tagalog!*"

VIII.

What my brothers and I heard behind the closed door:

"Why are you trying so hard to be accepted, Kos?"

"What do you want me to do *re* Caroline? I don' know what to do anymore, really!"

"If you want to be accepted, you don't do it like that. The children aren't used to that. You're too harsh! These are my children! I don't raise them that way."

"Harsh? Me? Nahhhh! Curly, she has to learn, you know? My father raised me this way. You know. Discipline. If you don't behave, *ah kala*! You would get it."

"And look how you turned out? If you're going to be this way, go back to Greece and take your discipline with you!"

He never left.

IX.

It was the dining table that broke the silence.

X.

"That's all you did today? Write?" Uncle Kostas asked me sternly one evening when he came home hot-headed from a long afternoon shift at the hospital and found me seated at the dining table, hunched over my blue hardbound notebook, penning a story in my childish handwriting. I believed then that I was writing a serious novel that would one day be published and had no time to answer him, let alone take a bath.

"*Waitwaiti'mgoingtolosethis…*" I slurred, rubbing my tired eyes with my nightgown that smelled of sun and salty perspiration.

He nagged me in Greek and marched with authority to the bedroom, returning almost instantly with my mother's comb. "Look at me," he demanded, tearing my eyes away from the page. "At least comb your

hair, you know? You know?'' he insisted, hacking the comb into the tangled bush that sat on my head, tugging fiercely at it. Irritated, I pulled away and he slammed the comb onto the table and disappeared into the room. I ran my hands through my hair making it fly in all directions and began to write again.

XI.

"*Ela re*! Put your legs in frog position! *Ela*, come on! We don't have all day *ah*?''

It was that time of day when he seemed to forget my name and all I heard him call me was Ela, which meant, "come on, hurry up,'' in Greek, a language that I learned in hasty snippets on those afternoons where the line between doctor and stepfather blurred, and all that seemed to matter was if I walked straight from the dining table on one side of the room to the chair he had placed on the other. To me, the long excruciating walk was like straddling the line between heaven and hell. "Heel strike!'' he would suddenly yell, causing me to trip on the tiled floor, turning my knees purple.

I would come home from school and the dining table would greet me, set up in the middle of the living room and, without eating, I would change into something loose, naked from the waist down. He would then push my tense thigh muscles lower and lower until I cried at the sound of crackling bones, and the soles of my feet would slip apart, giving up and my face glistened with tears.

The back of a chair was the enemy when he made me hold on to it and do a series of squats. I would stand straight and plunge down, getting up with a frustrated sigh when he said I was cheating or I wasn't standing straight enough. I gripped the chair tightly and imagined it flying across the room.

XII.

"Trust me, you know, I am a doctor,'' he told me as he held the hot iron above my left thigh. The hot compresses melted one Friday afternoon and blue gel leaked out of the pack inside the microwave. No breaths escaped

me as I stared, terrified at the iron being held just a few inches above my naked skin, its heat not really doing anything to relax my muscles, making them twitch nervously instead.

"Relax, relax," I assured myself between deep sighs.

` "Relax, relax, I am a doctor," he echoed soothingly. "Relax, relax, rela—"

The telephone rang.

And then, my thigh burned with the iron's heat.

"Hello, Zendy?" he was saying into the phone, slamming it down at the sound of my stabbing scream.

The skin of my thigh protruded like a brownish-blue crust, and he brushed egg yolk over it not saying anything.

For a moment trust was but another scar that would have to heal in a few weeks.

XIII.

When I made my stepfather angry, he always asked me what I would do if he died and I didn't learn any of the things he taught me. I would cry, he said, but then it would be too late. It was better to learn these things now while he was still alive.

XIV.

"It's okay, *moro mou*. Everything will be okay," he always reassured me when the therapy sessions ended and the dining table had been put back in its place. I pressed my tired, sweat-strewn face on it, feeling the warmth spread all over my body and wanting to believe him.

He sighed, planting kisses into my wet head of hair. "I'm sorry baby, but it has to be done that way, you know? If it doesn't hurt, it doesn't really help you. I mean, I don't want to do it," his voice broke. I looked up and saw him purse his lips together, his eyes regretful and clueless about what it was he could tell me. "But I have to. For you," he ended. The doctor in him disappeared as he sat down and told me this over and over again. "If I could do

it for you, I would, really. I would give you my own legs, *sou vara*. But what would you do with an old, fat man's hairy legs, huh?" he joked. "Nothing! *Re puste*, a beautiful girl like you! Better to have your own strong legs than mine! Mine are *malakias*! I mean, look at me, ah! Fat and you know I try to lose weight and it doesn't happen! Frustrating, I know. But I try. But what I try for? I am old, my life is over. Soon, I die," as he said this, he threw up his hands like he always did, for dramatic effect. "But you, your life is just starting! Let me help you, huh?" he continued, taking my face in his hands.

I smiled, nodding. Inside I could feel it again, an anger brewing inside me, not towards him, but towards everything else that turned him into a monster in my eyes, the monster that he wasn't: my stick-thin legs that seemed to take so long to get stronger, and when they did, they didn't stay that way too long.

"Trust me, mmm? Everything will be okay. I mean if everything isn't going to be okay, what else do I do it for? I could sleep you know? Watch TV! Say, *ah kala*! I just leave Curly alone and let her have fun and *kala*, I don't care. But no I care about you. So trust daddy, okay?"

I nodded. "Okay."

"Good girl, now go take your shower while I cook some nice pasta for you to eat!" With that he laughed and fetched me a towel from my room.

XV.

"Hey *moro mou*, I made for you something nice," he said, watching me study at the dining table. "You study hard, *ah*? That's good," he gave my shoulder a squeeze. "I made for you a multiplication *teble* so that you will beat all your classmates when you recite it next week. And they will lose because they do not know how to *multiplicate* in their minds. But you, *sifteiki*, very smart!"

In his steady doctor's hand he had written the multiplication tables from one to ten with his special multi-colored pens, and laminated it too. "I go to your room and put it on your wall so you see it every day and memorize it little by little. Good job!" he said, getting up.

"Thank you," I said, without looking up from the chapter I was reading, an appreciative grin spreading on my face.

"What is nine *ix* nine," he asked me a few weeks later the night before my Math final.

When it took me more than a minute to answer and he saw that I still counted out the product with nervous fingers, he lost his patience and told me: "You have to concentrate, *re* Curly! You have to try *hardur* than most *peepul* because in the real world *peepul* are evil. You're *eh* smart girl but you don' concentrate, you have to know these things because you can't walk and they will be your weapons, you know, *ah*?"

XVII.

It was Thursday when everything in our family changed. It all started with the slamming of a bedroom door on the other side of the hallway, and Uncle Kostas opening ours asking us to "Please come out because mommy needs you."

"It's hard… it's hard, Kos," she said, choking on her tears. It was the first time I had ever seen my mother cry, her face buried in her hands as she shook. The white pills were scattered across the dining table, some spilling over to the floor. She had been taking them for months, and since then there was a silent certainty within us all that the house had become a time bomb about to explode at anytime.

"It's hard, it's hard," she repeated tearing her hair, Uncle Kostas looked crushed as he patted her helplessly on the back. "Your mother has something to tell you," he said as we sat down.

My mother looked at us with bloodshot eyes and said, "I'm sorry it's been like this for us. I know it's hard. But we have to get through this as a family."

Uncle Kostas put his arms around my mother telling her that she needed to stop smoking and taking the pills because we needed her. "The kids and I need you," he said, nodding toward us to come and comfort our mother.

We needed her. We needed her and we needed to be a family. We needed her and from then on we called Uncle Kostas, Daddy.

XVIII.

It was my stepfather who taught me how to speak Greek.

He had worked for Dr. Pistevos, his mentor and the best child orthopedic surgeon in the whole of Athens, for free for months just so my mother would not have to spend any money for my operations—something I only found out and came to understand when I got much older.

The week before my operation in April, I sprawled on the green couch in his apartment in Athens, heavily bundled in thick blankets, watching Greek news. They were showing the bloody *salibatbat* scenes in Pampanga and the pictures were the only things familiar to me. As the program went to commercial, I squinted trying to read the Greek word for news that flashed on the screen in bold, Greek letters, yelling in triumph when the two-syllable word finally figured itself out in my mouth. That same evening, my stepfather came home with a children's Greek dictionary complete with pictures, and Greek food.

"*Souvlaki,*" he told me, stuffing the soft, foot-long, juicy beef wrap in my mouth. "Like the *shawarma* in Bahrain, but much better. The Greeks do everything better! You like it, *moro mou,* mmm?" I nodded, wolfing it down, and he did a celebratory dance, gyrating his hips and jutting his lips in and out.

In the days that followed he taught me the simplest words. The pain in the hospital was forgotten and we spent the days pointing at pictures and swallowing the language.

"*Spiti,* house. And soon we will go home," he said, when the painkillers would give out.

"*Milo,* apple…," he pointed at the apple that sat next to the tasteless soup on the food tray. "*Gala,* milk… Again, the milk better than in Bahrain, eh? When we get home I give you some, Milko. In Bahrain the milk is *skata*!" Shit. "Everything *goot* comes from Greece! Everything!"

"*Yiatros,* doctor," Dr. Pistevos chimed in as he did his rounds. "*Mifo vas*… Don' be afraid."

"*Spanakopita! Yasas moro mou, ti kanies?*" my step-grandmother Katy came in with a basket of spinach pies, her bright blue eyes looking worriedly at me as she shook her head and gave me a kiss.

A lot of other Greek words would follow later, but my stepfather would always end the days with the same words, to make me remember:

"S'gapo, agapi mou."

"I love you too, Daddy," I would reply before falling under a deep sleep.

XIX.

Eleven years later.

The autopsy of memory.

The room opens with the turn of a key and everything greets you as you enter: everything that was once your stepfather, all that he owned and all that he had become. They have all stayed in their places like obedient children. Even the coldness of the marble tiles has refused to leave. Your stepfather never liked carpets, you remember. Next to the sofa, the cat slippers you used to borrow to go to the bathroom haven't walked an inch. Not a ripple of sleep on the sofa. His shelf tells many stories: medical books shut closed gathering dust, in them the familiar handwriting that taught you the multiplication table; the CDs you would listen to in the car on the way to the movies every Friday; a bundle of movie tickets—most of which were to films you wanted to go to; he always asked the ticket collector if he could keep them—remind you of the time you found him snoring when the lights came on after the third Harry Potter film; bottles of Giorgio Armani perfume, half-empty—the smell of his wrist before going to work, the presence of an absence; a pair of shades and no sun. A heavily-taped envelope is swept under his study table—the letters written to your mother. Your stepfather never liked teddy bears but Mr. Green, the one he won at one of the many Christmas raffles at the hotel your mother worked at, sits on top of the TV, a small patch of cotton coming out of an opening in his back. You pick him up and decide to take him home with you, making a mental note to sew the poor thing up.

This apartment was never so silent or so clean; it always had an essence of movement, of being lived in—as though it had a breath of its own. Your stepfather's winter jacket would cling lazily to the back of an armchair; a coffee stain would stamp itself on the surface of the glass table or

on the much-circled TV guide; the video recorder would grumble at the precise hour he had set it to record movies he would bring back home to you and your brothers, labeling each tape with his special multi-colored markers. You and your brother enjoyed those, and the subtitles helped you learn the Greek alphabet by heart. The numbers would follow.

But no one lives here anymore and soon the entire place will be bare, will be absent. Even the dead flowers hanging in the hallway will be gone. As the door closes, the tinge of regret opens little by little inside your heart.

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