

# An Errand

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It was the sense of hearing that came to him first, bringing with it a low, insistent, a drone rising and dipping like the waves he grew up with on Samal Island. Skimming above the waves was a girl's voice, saying *ser, ser, ser*.

Moroy swung his arm up and opened his eyes to look at his watch: 3 a.m. It was also his way of checking if it hadn't been stolen. Behind the luminous hands and the starry black dial, delivering that girl's voice, was a boy who looked like he was still in high school. *Pebrero*—said the patch on his security guard's uniform—lightly rapped his knuckles on his arm as though he were a timid night janitor knocking on the door to the ladies' CR.

There were seven other men in the room, drivers and minders, a couple of them he knew by face and name. The sound of the sea was the sound of their snoring, their breaths coming hard and stale through all that fat in their throats. He was not on Samal Island. He felt an ache in his own throat and he knew he must have been snoring, too.

Whoever thought of putting *Pebrero* on the night shift must be pulling an inside job, Moroy thought, as he put on his shirt-jack. What could Sir possibly want at this hour?

He inhaled audibly as he walked past the boy, who was texting on his phone. He was the only staff at the drivers' dormitory. His only real job, it seemed, besides picking up the rare landline call and turning away late

check-ins, was to switch on the low-watt evening light in the entrance and switch off everything else, the TV and the aircon in the lobby. He couldn't possibly keep the drunks and the girls away.

Outside, the air had dipped into the further cold of dawn. Moroy put a hand in his pants and squeezed the button on the car key. He pressed another button and the engine started, making a sound softer than the faint sound of snoring that still hung in the air.

The hotel was a five-minute drive from the drivers' dormitories. His windshield was wet. His headlights probed the fog. His wipers were on full. When he drove up to the entrance, Sir was already there, shuffling on the top step, the lobby guard by his arm. He was dressed in the golf t-shirt and shorts he had worn that morning when they drove up from Manila.

Moroy pressed the window switch. Sir spoke into the gap as soon as it appeared.

"Kunin mo yung t-shirt kong Givenchy, yung may Mona Lisa na design sa harap," he said. "Alam mo 'yung Mona Lisa? Yung painting. Sa Louvre 'yun, 'yung museum sa Paris. Isang araw dalhin kita dun. Basta babae, naka-smile." He smiled without showing his teeth when he said *smile*. "I mean, hindi mo alam kung naka-smile o hinde, kunin mo 'yun, dalhin mo dito."<sup>1</sup>

"Sa kotse ba sir?"<sup>2</sup>

"Hindi. Sa bahay."<sup>3</sup>

"Sa bahay—sa Maynila, sir?"

"Oo. Sa Maynila."

"Yes sir." Moroy blinked as he said it, perhaps a little bit longer than he should have.

"Ayos. Nga pala, isama mo na rin yung medicine pouch ko, yung maliit, sa loob ng drawer dun sa tabi ng kama. Sa side ko, ha, hindi yung kay Norma."<sup>4</sup>

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1 "Get my Givenchy t-shirt, the one with the Mona Lisa design on the front," sir said. "Do you know the Mona Lisa? The painting. It's in the Louvre, that museum in Paris. One day I'll bring you there. It's a girl, smiling." He showed his teeth when he said *smile*. "I mean, you don't know if she's smiling or not, get it, bring it here."

2 "Is it in the car?"

3 "No, it's at home."

4 "Great. By the way, bring along my medicine pouch, the small one in the bedside table. My side, not Norma's."

It was time-consuming, it was expensive, and it all seemed completely unnecessary, but by the time Sir had finished his sentence Moroy had completely accepted the project.

“Yessir.”

He knew that shirt. He knew what meant: Brenda. The girl that gave him that shirt. The girl he often took home personally from his office every night, speaking to her loudly so the security guards and the other drivers could hear that her place was conveniently on the way to theirs. Which was a complete lie. Brenda lived with her mother and her grandmother on 10<sup>th</sup> street in Cubao, which was, on mostly any given hour of the day, a good two or three hours away from Legaspi Village. If they were lucky. Sometimes there was dinner, or a few drinks, on the way to dropping her off, but Moroy never really thought anything of these occasions.

Brenda was easily the prettiest one in the office. She had a little fat on her, but Moroy was OK with a little bit of fat. He liked some fat on them sometimes. He found it sexy that a girl would allow herself to let go a little bit. She would not be a thin woman on the way to being fat, or even vice versa; she would be a woman who didn't care, or acted like she didn't.

Brenda had something like that. From behind he saw a little valley and a lump, low on her hips, right where she wore the waistline of her pants and her skirts, like she was made of soft, flesh-colored clay and someone took another lump of clay, rolled it into his hands, and slapped it around her little body, massaging it half-heartedly until it only partly melted into her flesh. It made her look a little clumsy, a little careless. But it was more than just fuck-what-the-boys-think fat. This was teen fat. Growing-up fat. She had just graduated from college and this was her first job. Moroy figured that she was too young to know why she took it in the first place, but also at just the right age to trust her instincts.

He held Sir's gaze as the car window closed. He was wide awake. He'd never slept. She was probably in his room, playing in a bathtub full of heated water, playing with the bubbles, brushing them off with her breath when they threatened to grow larger.

Baguio was still very dark at a little past 3 a.m., and the glare of the hotel's overdone lighting in the mirror made everything else even darker. The fog had grown thicker. If he was going to make it fast he was going to have to take Kennon Road, which was full of twists and banks, but it was

going to be a real thrill.

The hotel lights disappeared and there was nothing but fog ahead of him and behind him. Moroy couldn't really tell what Brenda looked like from the driver's seat. She had ridden along dozens of times—even alone, on those times she needed to go somewhere for work and she didn't feel like taking a cab that day. But she always sat behind him. The right passenger's seat was always Sir's place. He couldn't even smell her perfume, the way he smelled the other staff's whenever they rode with Sir to a meeting. Brenda was too young for perfume. Knowing it was Brenda made her gift of the t-shirt especially touching. He kind of knew how much those t-shirts must have cost. He'd made it an unconscious habit to sneak a look at the receipts stapled to the shopping bags Sir and Ma'am left in the car. Those Givenchy shirts—he couldn't even pronounce it—most probably cost more than a thousand.

Brenda was a college graduate, sure, and it was a B.S. in business, but she didn't graduate from Ateneo, or La Salle, or UP, or abroad, like Sir's friends did. She had graduated from the rival school of Moroy's own college. A school with something like 70,000 students. He himself had never graduated, and the reasons had softened and blended into each other over the many years until what remained was his own self-resentment. There surely must have been a pretty good reason for it, and money was really the only reason he could think of.

She obviously didn't make very much; he was sure even he made more money than she did, but her family could obviously afford for her to graduate. And although her credentials and her transcript were enough to get her hired by someone like Sir, from here on, it would be her looks that would take care of the rest. “Ang kagandahan ay puhunan<sup>5</sup>,” they would say at the office.

That didn't subtract from her strong points, or from Sir's. He was a businessman. Though Moroy couldn't really put a finger on what he did for a living, he figured out that he was pretty good at what he did, and well respected in his field. That accounted for his money and his powerful connections. But it was mostly luck that Moroy could count on to explain the fact that this fine looking chick would allow him to get near her.

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5 “Beauty is capital”

He was on Kennon now, barreling through the zigzag like he was riding a motorcycle instead of a Land Cruiser. The bulletproof cladding made it heavier and faster. If this was a test, he was going to pass it.

“Sinusubukan niyo ba ako?”<sup>6</sup> was his trademark line. He had picked it up from President Erap back in the day. Moroy remembered the time Sir had left 77,800 in cash in a tightly rubber-banded envelope in the glove compartment. When he returned it to him the next morning these were the very words he used on his employer, in half-jest: “ser, sinusubukan niyo ba ako?” It was his turn to test him. He wanted to know if he could tell him that to his face. Sir laughed, but Moroy thought he had laughed a little too hard. There was something else there.

unhealthy, and he was beginning to get a little worried about his speed and his strength, but maybe it gave him a kind of stability, like a spinning top.

He thought about money on the stretch between Kennon to Pangasinan, right before the roads gave way to the new expressway that skipped the rest of the slog of small towns, with their churches and their municipal halls, their student crossings and their tricycles. That new expressway certainly cost a lot of money, too. He thought about Mona Lisa and the medicine box, and the money inside it, and before he knew it he had chewed up the entirety of EDSA and was in front of the house, buoyed by the euphoria that came with missed sleep.

Moroy barked at the mayor doma to get the t-shirt from the laundry. He didn’t need to ask about Ma’am. He knew she was out at the Eleuterios for mahjongg. He went up the stairs, feeling his weight and his breath with every step. He entered Sir’s room and took a moment to appreciate it, the bright light, the vast space, the rich, woody smell, the sudden quiet. The floor was freshly polished and the bed was made. He felt his steps were too loud as he walked over to the night stand opened the drawer: envelopes, USB sticks, a 9mm in its holster. He reached into the space and came upon the medicine box, a little tin can repurposed from its previous life as a candy container, smaller than he had expected it to be.

Before he could open it, the mayor doma entered the room, holding up the t-shirt by a hanger: the woman called Mona Lisa, smiling without smiling, her arms folded as though she were waiting impatiently.

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6 “Are you putting me to the test?”

The first real bottleneck between Makati and Balintawak was the last left turn on EDSA, where the entire avenue changed course by the SM City Mall. In the lull Moroy suddenly felt his missed sleep, and his hunger.

There was a Pancake House just across the entrance to Congressional Village. A boy tapped on the flank of the SUV until he settled into the parking space. He felt the pit of his stomach burn as he waited for his rice meal. Must be hunger, must be old age. It must be genetic. He had heard Sir and Ma'am talk about "genetic" all the time. It was the reason for many things: cancer, idiocy, political appointments.

He tried to guess how old Sir could be. He assumed he was much older, even though he looked so youthful. Genetic. Or plastic surgery. *Sinusubukan mo ba ako?* He remembered Sir's face, the thing that flashed when he said it. Fear, or guilt, or nothing, really. He was overthinking again.

"Thinking it over? Or overthinking?" he had heard Brenda tell Sir one time, her little voice carrying from the back seat, she had a clever little voice, and she used it as effectively in person and on the phone, when she was speaking to Sir. They were on the way to a meeting in Valenzuela, Bulacan. What was going to be an hour's drive had stretched into three. She said it after they'd been sitting silent for a long time. Overthinking. He knew what thinking it over meant, but it was the first time he had heard that word, overthinking.

"Overthinking?" Sir said, the top of his head suddenly flitting to the side in his rearview. "What does that mean?" he repeated: "Overthinking?" Sir obviously knew what it meant.

Brenda used the very same friendly, accommodating tone she used on their most difficult clients. "You know, when you're worry too much about something it becomes something else already. Like distrust. Or fear."

"Fear?" Sir said, as though he suddenly didn't know what that meant, either. Nothing was said after that; by that time they had finally arrived at their client's sardine canning factory.

Brenda—he had never really seen her face because it had been so ingrained in him to avert his eyes, but he was so sure now that she looked special, beyond just being pale-skinned, well-scrubbed, and well-dressed like the rest of them. She had "right manners and good conduct." She paid the right compliments, never intruded on privacy, and pretended to be amused, even delighted, when Sir told her something about his family life.

Ma'am was an interior decorator who had her own set of difficult clients, and their child went to Ateneo Grade School. Brenda was English-speaking like the rest of them, but whenever she spoke, Moroy knew she wasn't quite in the league of Sir and his close circle of old friends. He couldn't really put a finger on it, but he knew that was exactly how Sir wanted it.

A billboard advertising a family-owned resort straddled a boundary dike between two ricefields burned pale by the sun. The amenities were in bullet points: world-class swimming pool and water park, luxurious rooms and suites, family restaurant.

The radio had been tuned to DZBB "*sais treynnta.*" He'd been following the senate hearings on the latest budget scam. He knew exactly what some of those people looked like, he knew their voices from the way they spoke to their drivers and their minders. They all knew what they were up to even before the senate hearings. He turned the radio down and brought the SUV to a stop on the shoulder. Cars blasted their horns as they drove past. He allowed himself to think of taking the detour. Although it wasn't even midmorning he felt hungry again.

He saw the shirt hanging by its hanger in the rear and he remembered his errand. The canister had cradled itself in a crevice in the passenger seat. He took the lid off and saw no cash inside—an ATM card would have fit pretty nicely. Instead there was a little pool of blue pills, a dozen or so, that had settled gently on the bottom, edge to edge. He knew what they were from stories told by other folks like himself—drivers, minders, bodyguards, handlers. A great blue-colored mixture of a sense of pity and a feeling of great responsibility washed over him and into the cabin.

This was not just an errand; this was another test. Sir had laid on Moroy's shoulders an uncommon trust. In the quieted cabin he remembered Brenda's voice, talking to Sir, telling him things about work, about her mother. Though he couldn't understand most of what they talked about, he heard in Sir's voice a tone of gentle desperation. She would laugh, like a high exhale, a laugh she barely suppressed, a laugh at the game he was trying so hard to play. He felt an irrational hatred come over him: like he wanted to screw her out of spite.

Moroy dropped his window as he passed the country club guardhouse, making sure the window opened just enough for the lady guard to be seen by him through his mirrored shades, and that she could see the

crocodile patch on his chest. Sir had given him that shirt at their staff Christmas party, all wrapped in a big stiff paper bag that announced “Lacoste.” Its gartered cuffs lightly, but precisely, embraced his upper arms, its brazen, multicolored vertical stripes going against every instinct of his to wear. He brought his hand up and perched it on the top of the steering wheel to make sure she saw his Submariner. It was fake, of course, but it was a real class-A knockoff Sir had bought for him on one of his trips to Bangkok. He had never told anyone, not that the people around him knew what a Rolex was, though more than once or twice he had been surprised. His regular massage therapist at his favorite chop-chop joint, for example, had exclaimed “Uy! Rolex!” when she saw it sitting on the sidetable. “That’s fake,” he said, firmly and with finality, but the girl was on to him and did a double take and said “Weh! Hindi nga?”<sup>7</sup> The lady guard didn’t look up from her cellphone. If she only knew who he really was, how close he was to the very top. He was listened to. He had some bearing on things. He was one of the good guys.

He didn’t know how long he had been away. Sir had texted him twice already, at around 7 a.m. and right as he was entered Kennon again. And then nothing. He remembered the way he shifted and sighed in the backseat after they’d brought Brenda home on one of those nights she agreed to come out with him. He’d be pretending he was worried about work, about home, about money. He would tell him to hurry home, hurry home, take this road, take that turn, as if he needed to be told, as if he didn’t know the way.

Moroy fixed the hotel valet with a stare through his sunglasses as he stepped out of the SUV, leaving the door open as he walked into the lobby. It was 11 a.m.

He went up the elevator and knocked on his door, “Sir, sir, sir,” remembering to tighten the I’s. It opened a crack and a hand reached out, fingers stretched upward like a cup, ready to receive the delivery. Moroy put on a poker face and deposited the canister into Sir’s hand, its insides making a clicking sound. The hand withdrew, and came out again, frozen upward in a signal to wait.

Moroy tried to see into the room but it was dark inside. He strained to hear her voice but heard nothing. The hand darted out, holding up one

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7 “C’mon! You’re kidding, right?”



of the blue pills in the middle of an OK sign. Moroy felt like he had been found out. He had made a mental note to himself to filch one but he had forgotten. He cupped his hand under his master's to receive the parting tip.

When the valet brought the SUV up the driveway Moroy could see, even through the double-tinted windows, the Mona Lisa swinging on its hanger in the back seat. He smiled, half at the girl, half at himself, knowing he had accomplished his mission.

*Angelo R. Lacuesta has won numerous awards for his fiction, among them two Philippine National Book Awards, the Madrigal Gonzalez Best First Book Award and several Palanca and Philippines Graphic Awards. He was literary editor of the Philippines Free Press and is currently editor-at-large at Esquire Philippines*