

A Condition of Worship

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This presents some sort of danger. I think I have read this somewhere. Is it “Death in Venice”? Yes! That’s it; Thomas Mann’s classic! The sweet ecstasy of just looking; the sheer pleasure of just watching, invigorated by a presence, enraptured by a quick glance; I am damned for life! This is probably what poetry in motion means. That beauty! That kind of beauty that strikes you blind, hits you hard at the pit of your stomach, and takes all your breath away. Every leap, every dash, a trickle of sweat, back of hand wiping wet parts of skin and fabric, that unaffected concentration to score a point, to get the ball to the other side, defying gravity, to be the hero. And I am here, transfixed by solitary rapture, the sweetest torture. Is this a case of life imitating art?

It’s Gustave and Tadzio all over again, but with a new twist this time. I am not as old as Gustave. He must have been a hundred years old, smelling of damp earth and clay, wrinkled to the bone, ravaged by heartbreak and time. He must have been an ugly sight; quite pathetic as he oggled and drooled over a boy fifty years his junior. And how old was Tadzio? Thirteen or fourteen perhaps, a young, juicy, succulent twink. I am no Gustave. I am still in my prime. I just turned forty a few months ago. They say forty is the new thirty. I feel good about it; it is a lie. Sometimes we need convenient lies in order to go on living our sad lives.

I look young for my age; early thirties they say. I go to the gym regularly, three times a week. I do it religiously, tiring myself with weight-lifting, crunches, squats, cardiovascular workout. It pays to be well-built.

The body is made for making love. One poet said that we love only “with” body. I totally agree. I believe the lies perpetuated by people my age, but the truth is I’m forty and I can do nothing about it. Forty-year-olds are responsible for the greatest advertising strategy of this century, which simply means Ta-dah – that they could still have lots and lots of sex. This is what it’s about – sex with a capital S. When one turns forty, it follows that we feel more confident about what we know and we become more secure about ourselves. We have to because we have no choice. Once looks fade, one must attain a certain level of respectability. Respect is all we’ve got. By age forty, we are expected to have already climbed the corporate ladder, finished our MAs and PhDs, and written all those useless and worthless research papers that nobody reads except those doing research themselves who are mostly clueless about what they are doing. We have to content ourselves with achievements, respect, dignity, etcetera, etcetera, but the truth is, the biggest problem and preoccupation of those who are in their forties and above is their “desirability”. We waste our time and actually enjoy our pathetic efforts to slow down the aging process. Why don’t we get tired of it? Haven’t we had enough? How many more fucks do we need! Would we still want to fuck at seventy? But fucking -- the ability to still get it up, fuck all night and make your partner see stars and sing the star-spangled banner ala Mariah Carey with that signature whistle in you forties is the litmus test.

I thank God I have good genes. I still have my hair, lots of it. I take after my father who in his seventies still has sexy, wavy hair. My late mother had prominent cheekbones which I inherited, and when you have high cheekbones, you know that it will take time before your facial skin sags. Many of my high school friends and colleagues my age and even younger have receding hairlines or have just gone bald. That is why I love high school and college reunions. I flatter myself. I reassure myself that I am still desirable despite my age. But at the end of the day, I know I am still forty, and in ten years I will be fifty.

When I think about *Death in Venice*, I can’t help but cringe. I used to love the novella. I taught it my classes. I hate to see myself in Gustave, but I will be in a few years’ time if I don’t stop this madness. I always thought I could detach myself from the texts that I teach no matter how affected I am by the sad plight of my favorite characters: Renee, the fifty something

conciierge who hides her intelligence in Muriel Barbery's *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*; Ricardo, the man who falls madly in love with a worthless woman in Mario Vargas Llosa's *Bad Girl*; Midori, the girl who falls for a guy who is crazy about a suicidal girl in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, Josie O'Meara, the widow who falls for the assassin who holds her hostage in Edna O'Brien's *The House of Splendid Isolation*; Senhor Jose, the lonely employee who gets obsessed with a name printed on an old index card in Jose Saramago's *All The Names*; and fuck, Gustave, the old man who falls in love with a young, beautiful boy in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*! Why does love have to be so tragic?

Right now I'm listening to Maroon 5's "Love Somebody" on my iPod. I play it over and over as I watch him and the other players in their blue and yellow jerseys position themselves to hit the ball. I am not the cheesy type but I am making an exception this time. "If I fall for you, I'll never recover. If I fall for you, I'll never be the same" sings Adam Levine, the group's lead singer. It's funny how lyrics of pop songs seem to say the exact words and *say* them to you at the right moment especially when you try effortlessly to *cinematize* your moment. This is the fifteenth time I'm playing the song. I feel like a fool. I should have some self-respect. Right now I have none. Well, at least it's my secret. I want to reveal it big time soon, but right now, I'm just giving him hints, like staring at him when he's not looking; and when he looks my way, I hold that gaze for a few seconds, and then I smile at him and look away or go back to the book I'm reading. I'm reading pulp, a sappy romance novel about a middle-aged woman during the 19th century falling in love with her maid's nineteen-year-old son. It's kind of right up my alley at the moment.

"I may only be half way there, but take me all the way..." Levine continues. Now why this song? It was the song playing when he sat beside me at the burger joint. I asked the team to follow us, my friend Ryan and me, after volleyball practice to the burger joint right in front of the gym. Only two of them did. I was ecstatic when I saw him enter the glass door. The other player was a nice gay guy with a small frame and a waif-like body. I asked them about their zodiac signs and learned that my Tadzio is a Virgo.

We started talking about music which was a good start, since I am a music lover myself. I learned from the other guy that Tadzio could sing well, like a member of those boy bands. He said he liked Maroon 5 and

the song playing at that moment. What a coincidence! I like the band too. Does that mean we're soul-mates? I think I am going too far.

After that classic love-at-first-sight episode, I stalked him on Facebook. I was quite pleased with the things I saw on his page. There were those usual photos taken during outings. He looked good in his chinos, summer shorts, and shades. There were photos of him dancing on the beach with his colleagues; having dinner with friends; posing with students who looked love struck, particularly the girls; some serious-looking photographs of him in some seminar or conference listening to a faceless speaker; a few photographs with his family members mostly his sisters, all quite pretty. My favorite showed him lying in a hammock reading a book to a toddler.

This is dangerous. I don't think I can pull this off. Well, maybe I can. Have I lost my touch? I hope not. I am not really very good at this. I am afraid that once I start the chase, I won't be able to stop. This is all Thomas Mann's fault. This is literature's curse. We bibliophiles are masochists; we pattern our lives after our favorite tragic characters—to suffer in silence, to wallow in misery, to listen to cheesy love songs when we're on the brink of slashing our wrists. We never learn our lesson. I should be thankful that it's happening to me now; the sooner the better. I don't think I would be able to handle this in my *fifties* or *sixties*. I can't do a Mary Carson, Barbara Stanwyck's character in that made-for-TV melodrama movie *The Thornbirds*, an old woman falling in love with a young, handsome priest.

Tadzio in the novel is a god, the personification of male beauty, the kind of beauty that unintentionally destroys lives. You toss and turn in your bed. You hurt everywhere, a hurt that is both painful and sweet, so sweet that you crave it. That's exactly what's happening to me now, especially the tossing and turning in bed.

He's my Tadzio. When I met them at the gym before the volleyball practice, the members of the team were introduced to me by my best friend Ryan, a brilliant graduate student currently enrolled in the Ph.D. program for literature. There were only seven of them that time. I knew with just one look that most of the players were gay, although Ryan assured me that the others who happened not to be around were straight. I don't think any straight guy would be so passionate about or waste his time on volleyball, a sport that allows you to strike a sexy pose while suspended in the air for

a few seconds as you hit the ball with a dramatic spike. There's Yul, a call center agent who has time for volleyball despite his busy schedule; Bryan, a member of a popular TV dance group, the one with my Tadzio at the burger joint, works in an advertising agency; Bill, a thirty-something Chinese ophthalmologist, quiet and refined; Howie, with thick eyebrows and an annoying scowl, a full-time graduate student taking up Masters in Hospital Administration; Cheesecake, a gorgeous transgender who resembles Marian Rivera and works in one of the big television networks; Rizza (or Elmer), his six-foot-two best friend, an MBA student who loves talking about beauty pageants; Adrian, a former student leader in his undergraduate days, with a great smile, really nice bod, muscles in the right places, charming. He would be number two in my list. If Tadzio does not respond, I think he would do. And then there's Roel, the team captain, a working student during his college days, Psychology magna cum laude. Like me, his girlfriend watches the practice and the games regularly. There's Coach RJ, a player for the national volleyball team who also dabbles in painting and archery. And then there's Justin, my Tadzio, twenty-four years old, about five-foot-nine, fair-skinned with a neatly-trimmed stubble, dark brown eyes that light up when he smiles, lean and ripped like a volleyball player should be. He teaches Management and Marketing courses in a college run by priests in a nearby province.

It just happened. That sounds like a cliché, but aren't all love stories clichés. There is a formula to it. Your eyes meet, you exchange a few words, and then BANG, you're in love or at least you think you are. I hate the feeling. I despise the enslavement that love does to people. It's an addiction. Once you've tasted it, there's no getting over it. You feel like you just want to watch the one you love forever. To hell with fucking responsibilities! To hell with what other people will think! To hell with the world! Later you realize that you have wasted so much time, effort, money, and tears. But what the heck! It feels good!

I know that he knows. I have no doubts about it. I can feel the tension between us. I don't think I'm imagining it, but I should be the one to make the first move. Though I have to be careful, I must come up with a good plan, a plan that will not make me look stupid, desperate or too interested. I have to consider my position in the University. That's one major problem when you're mature and quite accomplished. You can't just make a mistake, unlike young people who can break down anywhere, in the

streets, at the train station, in the football field, in the cemetery. But when someone like me becomes a fool for love, it's not only sad, it's pathetic and disgusting.

I asked Ryan what I should do. I hate how I sounded asking him that question. The high pitched voice that came out of me was that of a lovesick, boy-crazy, teenage girl desperate to get noticed by the boy who doesn't even know she exists.

I can't just go on this way, stealing glances, waiting for him to respond. I am the older one. I should make the first move. There are many possible ways. I want to ask him if he's single or if he's seeing someone. That's more like it, very adult, very mature, very masculine, and very much playing the role of noble "pursuer," but I might just get an immediate answer that I don't want to hear, like: "Yeah, I'm seeing someone" or "I'm dating" or worse "I'm in love with someone." That would shatter me. But he could also say "I'm single," and that would mean I can go in for the kill.

I can't ask him "Would you consider dating an older or a more mature man?" That would sound really awful. I don't want to sound like I'm pleading, begging, selling myself short; or give him the impression that I'm second best or damaged goods. I have too much pride.

A safer strategy is to ask my friend Ryan to fish for some information. I can miss one practice and he could ask Justin the pertinent questions. I am not even quite sure if he's gay. I just think he might be because he plays volleyball. He looks straight, but he just might be acting straight. If he's straight, then that's a dead-end street. Ryan is very willing to do this for me. But that would make me look like a coward. It would be too obvious that I need someone to ask the questions for me.

I could ask him out for coffee casually after practice, maybe to join me and Ryan, talk about the usual things: work, studies, hobbies, movies, books that he reads, sports, volleyball, volleyball, and more volleyball. After a few coffee dates, I can ask him as well as his team to go out for a night of KTV. I will secretly dedicate songs like Vertical Horizon's "You're A God," Michael Johnson's "I'll Always Love You," George Michael's sexy "Father Figure" and if push comes to shove, I just might sing my best rendition of "I Want Your Sex," which I could sing with the signature George Michael moan and breathy vocals. That would get his attention. But that

would be too cheap. I don't want to sound like a *matrona*, desperate to get into some kid's pants.

I could play the dependable, intelligent man, giving him valuable advice about his master's thesis—detached, but caring and concerned, someone he would look up to. Something like a mentor-student relationship. Socrates and the Pederasty tradition, yeah something like that, very Greek. I just have to be a little careful because he might end up seeing me as the father or uncle he never had. Or I could just tell him that I like him. No frills, no mincing with words, no drama. Get it over and done with. I should decide soon.

I'm praying for a sign. Yes, I believe in signs. I prayed to get someone before and I got him. He was a married man, and thirty years old. I was only thirty-three. He said he was open to same-sex relationship. I had doubts of course. We were dating for about two months and I still wasn't quite sure whether he was "the one." The sex of course was spectacular. When his three-year-old son got sick, I told him to text me if he needed help. I accidentally put my mobile phone on silent mode and when I got out of bed to go to the bathroom, I saw my phone blinking. A message at two in the morning! It was him. He was asking for help. I told him I would be there. That was the sign. I went to the hospital and gave him five thousand bucks. He told me he couldn't believe it; he realized that I truly loved him. This went on for five years, until he got an offer to work in the Middle East. I didn't stop him. It was a good five years anyway.

I'll ask for a sign again. But right now. I'll just play it cool. I'll just enjoy what is actually going on. The fleeting vision of Justin, dripping with sweat, looking super sexy and sturdy just standing with both his hands on his waist and exchanging hi-fives with the other players, moving briskly, perfectly synchronized with the others, blocking deadly spikes, taking a break, and as if in slow motion, energizing himself with Gatorade that slowly spills down to his neck, taking his shirt off revealing a sinewy and sinuous body, smiling and walking past me with his blue towel around his neck. I take half breaths. I close my eyes and for a few seconds freeze the moment in my mind.

I had a strange dream. I woke up sweating. I've been sweating a lot lately. In my dream I was praying to a female saint. I just don't re-

member her name. I'm not even sure if there is a saint who looked like her. She did look familiar but I couldn't place where I'd seen her. She was wearing a brown robe. She was dressed like a nun, like most female saints. She was quite tall, had pale skin, thin lips, a pert nose, prominent cheekbones, and sleepy eyes. She had big breasts, cup C perhaps. I never thought saints could be so well-endowed. She was standing on a rock about three feet high in front of a tree with silver leaves. Her hands were clasped as if in prayer. Her lips were moving and her eyes were looking up in the sky. She didn't seem to mind me, but I was sure she knew I was there.

There were differently colored birds flying around her, all of them chirping. It looked like a scene from an old Disney movie where the only thing that looks real is the actor singing and tap dancing with cartoon characters. There were strange insects crawling on the rock where she was standing. Two looked like pink praying mantises with glass butterfly wings. Another looked like an ant, but it was five inches long, greenish, with a head as big as that of a grasshopper. There were three smaller insects that resembled beetles but instead of the usual dots, one had zebra stripes, the other had a leopard spots, two had green and blue candy swirls on their wings, and another had strange handprints on its wings. I recited a memorized prayer. I tried to call her attention by waving to her but she didn't respond. She was still engrossed in her prayer. I sat on what looked like a marble bench, like those you see in big campuses, where lovers sit and whisper sweet nothings to each other. After a few minutes, she opened her arms wide and smiled as she looked up the sky again. Afterwards, she closed her eyes and bowed her head. I stood up and walked a few steps towards her. When she saw me smiling sheepishly at her, she cocked one of her eyebrows, took a deep breath, turned her head sideways as if annoyed, then looked at me from head to foot, sizing me up.

"And may I know who you are? I didn't see you coming?" She was obviously irked by my intrusion.

"I didn't mean to intrude..."

"Oh but you did! I was praying intently and you had the nerve to bother me!" she said. I detected a fake American Southern drawl in the last three words especially in the word bother, which sounded like *bawther*.

She reminded me of wasted Southern belles in those sad Tennessee Williams' plays.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sister... Saint... Saint?"

"You mean you don't know me?" She glared at me.

"Well, I'm not that religious you know. I pray...yes, I do pray...but I don't know the names of all the saints. I'm quite familiar with some of them...you know, there's Saint..."

"So you're saying I'm not as famous as the other saints? How dare you...you puny mortal!"

"It's not that. It's just that...I apologize...you're Saint...?"

"That's Saint Voodah for you?"

"Saint Voodah? You're kidding right?"

"Let me remind you that you're talking to a saint and if you don't behave..."

"I'm sorry, Saint Voodah. I'm in a dream, in my dream, so this is more surreal than surreal...I'm really sorry...it's just that the name Voodah sounds..."

"Surreal?"

"Yes, because...because, you're rather a sexy saint. I don't mean to offend but I've never seen a saint as...as...well-endowed as you...with all your curves."

"Oh really! I think I'm going to like you after all!" Saint Voodah giggled. She flipped her hair like those models in shampoo commercials on TV. She said the word fooler the way Kathy Bates said it in the movie *Misery*.

"That's why I didn't think you were a saint. You're more like a bombshell," I said.

"Oh stop it! Although I don't blame you for thinking that because those who have this same dream say the same thing," Saint Voodah seemed to love the attention she was getting from me. I had a feeling she was demented. Maybe she only thought she *was* a saint. But if she really was a saint, she might be able to help me.

Saint Voodah was smiling to herself, pleased with what she just heard. I was a bit shocked when she cupped her breasts, like she was getting them ready for something.

“By the way Saint Voodah...”

“Yup...” she said the words without looking at me.

“I have a question. Actually I need your...” I had to plead for my cause while she was still in a good mood, though I didn’t think there were moody saints.

“Help...you need my help...am I right, Jerry?” Saint Voodah had guessed what I was going to say next.

“You know my name? Well yes, Saint Voodah. I really need your help.”

“Duh! I’m a saint remember. Even before you say what’s on your mind, I know what you would ask for. And of course everyone needs my help. I mean who doesn’t? I’m the one you go to when you need signs. Long before semiotics became a field of study, even before Roland Barthes studied signs, I was already giving them away, and these theorists claim to know everything about signs! Bah!” Saint Voodah was losing her temper again.

“So you’ll...”

“Do I have a choice? That’s why I’m here. That’s my job, to help needy mortals like you with your pathetic wishes. I hate being on-call all the time, but what can I do?”

I kept quiet. Saint Voodah looked exasperated again.

“You know you have a point Jerry. That Justin, the guy you have the hots for, is a damn looker. He’s a hottie. I don’t blame you. If I were human, I would’ve done the same thing and felt the same way, but I’m glad I’m a saint. I don’t have to worry about things like...”

“Please help me Saint Voodah. I really need your help. I’m kinda lost right now,”

“Oh c’mon Jerry, you don’t look lost or helpless to me. I mean you’re nearly six feet tall. You’re in your forties, quite intelligent, so you don’t strike me as a vulnerable person. You’re very strong, I can tell.”

“But this time I’m not. I don’t know what to do. I need... I need...”

“A sign?”

“Yes a sign, Saint Voodah, unless...unless you can make him love me...”

“Look here Jerry. I’m a saint, not Cupid. It’s a different world. If you want you can call out to him, but I’m sure he’s gonna mess up your life even more! Why did I ever end up a saint for gay men!”

“I’m sorry. I’m just desperate...”

“Aren’t you humans always desperate?”

I kept silent again. I didn’t want to make her angry. She was my only chance.

“Okay Jerry. I’ll help you. I’ll give you a sign.”

“You will? You really will?”

“Of course! Why are you even having this dream in the first place if you wouldn’t get a sign?”

“All right. What is it Saint Voodah? I’m excited to know.”

“On the third game, when you see a bouquet of peach roses, it means...”

Suddenly Saint Voodah’s voice seemed garbled. I couldn’t hear her voice. All I could hear was a loud repetitive ringing. Saint Voodah was slowly disappearing from my sight. She was still saying something when I opened my eyes. It was my alarm clock ringing. It was five a.m.

“Damn!” I shouted at my alarm clock. “I was this close to that saint’s message! Damn!”

A bouquet of peach roses on the third game – that was it.

The gym is packed with people, mostly teenagers in blue and orange shirts. There are adults too, probably parents of the volleyball-obsessed kids. Loud music from Kesha, Rihanna, Jason Derulo, Katy Perry, Bruno Mars, and yes, Maroon 5, artists that I am very familiar with, blasting through the speakers. People carrying all sorts of things—elongated balloons, battery-operated plastic rods, about two-foot long, party poppers, luminous sticks, and multicolored flaglets. They are ready to wave them up in the air when the game started. It’s the third game. The team won the first two games which meant things were going as planned, based on what Saint Voodah had told me.

“All I have to do now is to keep watch for a bouquet of peach roses in this sea of black, brown, and burgundy heads,” I tell myself.

I am seated in the front row of the bleachers to have a good view of the game, and of course of Justin. From the side entrances of the gym, the players enter. The crowd cheers. They wave at the crowd. They see me and I wave back. Justin looks at me and smiles. It’s a shy smile. He lowers his gaze for a moment and looks at me again. I hold his gaze for a few seconds and he smiles at me, a more reassuring smile, one that goes straight to my guts. I take it as a signal that he *knows*.

The warm-up takes some ten minutes. Everyone can see that both teams are in top form, but I have a strong feeling my team will win. I always have feelings like that and they usually come true.

He looks fresh, like he has just taken a bath. I can imagine the smell of his hair, just like that time when he sat beside me. He smelled of jasmine only muskier. His skin, particularly his neck and shoulders, was citrusy, lemony fragrant. It looks like he had just had a haircut that morning, a few hours before the game. He looks handsome as usual in his blue and lime green jersey. There is no trace of roughness in the way he carries himself inside the court. He’s sleek and elegant as a gazelle, fluid and flowing like honey and melted butter, yet somehow solid and steel-like. While the other players look overwrought, exerting too much effort to toss, block spikes, and dive dramatically on the court’s hard wooden floor, Justin is king of cool and quiet confidence, sleek like a brand new car with just a glint of soft but masculine vulnerability.

The third game is crucial, because if my team wins, it would mean playing in the semi-finals. Although I’m not much of a sports fan, I kind of enjoyed the past few weeks just watching them practicing and playing, doing death-defying stunts just to get the ball over to the other side of the net. I used to play volleyball during my elementary years, a little in high school, but I forgot all about it in college, because I became more preoccupied with reading. I’m tapping my feet, the right one first, then the left, then the right again. It’s a sign of nervousness. I had been thinking about this game for days.

The referees arrive, two heavy-set women with short hair. They look like men. They’re wearing dark blue tight-fitting shirts which emphasize their big breasts. The shirts have two white stripes on both sleeves which

match their jogging pants. They look dead serious like those abusive wardens in women's prisons. I know they have to put on a very convincing no-nonsense scowl to make the players and the audience think they can't be bullied.

The players of both teams mechanically shake hands. The game starts but I can't concentrate because I have to be on the lookout for peach roses. That Saint Voodah was probably just a fraud. Why did I ever allow myself to get duped by that bogus saint? People were screaming, waving flaglets and phallic balloons.

The first set is very intense. There's a lot of shouting, mocking, and berating. We have to win two sets. Both coaches have grave expressions on their faces. They call timeouts to remind the players of their strategy, their tactics, and how to "kill" the other team. How this actually works is beyond me. How to actually anticipate what the other players will do and what your teammate are thinking when you're focusing too much on taking the lead is somehow lost in my language? Literature is definitely much easier.

We win the first game. This inspires the team. They're all smiling. I know RJ is telling them to do everything to win the second game. Justin is dripping with sweat, breathing heavily, but looking pleased. I'm looking around, feeling stupid, waiting for a bouquet of peach roses to drop from the ceiling. Then I decide to give up on the idea of seeing peach roses and just enjoy the second set. Maybe I should ask another saint, a more reliable one, for a clearer sign next time. Gyms, perspiration, love, and roses don't actually go together. Why did I fall for that in the first place?

The second set starts. The other team scores a succession of three quick points. The guys on my team are not able to receive the first three serves. This stuns them. I start cheering for my team. When they don't get the fourth serve, RJ calls for a timeout, and I see him making chopping gestures with his hands. Is he explaining some new strategy, or just scolding them for being such klutzes? The players nod their heads. I see Justin looking at the scoreboard, 4-0, in favor of the other team. He breathes deeply a few times. He is listening intently to what the coach is saying. They return to court after shouting "UNITED" which is the team's signature cheer. The game continues and my team is back in fighting form. They immediately garner four points to the team's six. That is a good sign.

The game continues. I am screaming and shouting. I can't hear my own voice. People are jumping up and down. I have forgotten all about the peach roses. Howie, one of the players, attempts to take the ball which comes hurling towards him like a rocket. He makes a quick jump to lessen the impact as the ball almost hits his face, but he lands on one foot. He is suddenly on the floor, squirming in pain. RJ calls for another timeout. I stand up, gasping at the mishap. His teammates carry him to the bench. The resident physical therapist immediately goes to him. He signals to the other players to give them some room. He makes Howie rest in one corner as he examines his foot. He opens his first aid kit and applies something to it. Justin goes to him and puts his hand on his shoulder. Howie does not respond. He seems to be in shock.

The players, except for Howie, return to their places. My team looks wounded, but I can sense that they are going to get even and eventually win the game. I see it in their eyes, the kind of burning fury that you see in people when they're mad.

I think this is the magic of sports. While playing, your team becomes family. For a while, I envy them because I am a mere spectator even though I am their manager. Managers are not really part of the team. You support them but the game can go on with or without you. You don't make points. You don't sweat like everyone else. You don't feel that rage when the team is losing or the same kind of joy when they win. Players have their own secret language that you can only know a little about. They appreciate your presence, but you're not technically a member of the team even if you have your own set of jerseys just like the ones they're wearing in the game. But I'm happy with whatever access I have to the team. I don't think they are even aware of any of this. I guess I am the only one "intellectualizing" my position in the team.

My players don't waste much time. They move faster, glide in the court with graceful fierceness, and shout their coded lines of attack, like warriors intent on winning the battle. The other team tries hard but they fail. I know they can sense the animal fury raging inside my players. Sports is all psy-war. It is about bullying your opponents. You send them clear signs of predatory power, like a spider or a scorpion closing in on a helpless insect.

The other team is losing steam. And in one magical and powerful swoop, Justin delivers a spike that hits the face of one of the players of the other team really hard. That is the one point the team needed to be declared the winner. We all scream and cheer. Justin's teammates carry him on their shoulders. He is their champion not only for winning the game that will secure them a sure spot in the semi-final round, but also for the sweet revenge he has exacted for Howie who is clapping and screaming from where he is seated.

I go outside to congratulate the team. Howie is carried out by the therapist and he is made to sit on one of the chairs placed just right outside the gym. The members of the team are gathered around a sofa and two love seats, sweaty and tired, but beaming with pride. I approach them and offer my congratulations. They all say thank you and have a group hug with me. I particularly congratulate Justin for the winning spike. I shake his hand and the feel of his sweaty palm and fingers send, (as they say in romance novels) shivers up and down my spine. He smiles back and thanks me.

"This calls for a celebration!" I say.

"Pizza! Pizza! Pizza!" they all shout in unison.

"Sure, sure! There's one across the street, Cabbie's. Or do you want to go somewhere else?" I ask them.

"Cabbie's fine, sir!" Bryan says.

"Okay, I'll..." I am about to tell them something, when a security guard appears. He is carrying a bouquet of peach roses.

"Wow! Is that for me?" Cheesecake says.

I look at the bouquet of roses. I am unable to say anything. Saint Voodah was telling the truth after all. Bless her!

"Where did these peach roses come from?" I ask myself.

"Are you Justin Gutierrez," the lanky, dopey-looking security guard asks Cheesecake.

"Of course not! I'm Cheesecake!" Cheesecake retorts.

"Maybe they're for me?" Rizza says.

"Didn't you hear what *manong* guard said, They're for Justin!" Adrian says.

"For me?" Justin looks genuinely surprised.

“Why would anyone give me these ... ah..ah flowers?” Justin smiles, examining the bouquet of roses.

“Owws, *kunwari ka pa!* I’m sure you know it’s from you know who!” Cheesecake teases him.

“Who? I have no idea?” Justin says in a confused tone, but he seems flattered by the attention he is getting from his team mates, and by the idea that he has a secret admirer.

“*Naku, dedma pa daw oh!*” Rizza jokes.

I look at the bouquet of roses with both strange fascination and profound hatred.

“You have a secret admirer!” RJ says.

“Really, I have no idea!” Justin says.

“Look at the card! Maybe there’s a name there!”

Justin looks at the card. It read: “Congratulations! From B.”

“Who the hell is B?” Justin asks.

“C.mon! you mean you don’t know?”

Justin is red in the face.

I know this is my cue to leave.

“Well guys. I’ll just see you at Cabbie’s in a while,” I say. No one hears me. No one is interested in what I am saying. Why would anyone care about pizza? A mysterious bouquet of peach roses holds more mystery and wonder? I tap RJ on the shoulder and tell him I will meet them at the pizza place. RJ just gives me a perfunctory nod and resumes teasing Justin just like the others.

I walk slowly away from them. I can still hear them laughing. I don’t want to look back where they are gathered around Justin, all excited about the flowers. I suddenly feel the need to breathe.

Finally I am out of the gym. I don’t want to see them anymore, but I had promised them that celebration. I should play my part well. I have always been true to my word. As I cross the street going to Cabbie’s, I can still hear the laughter.

The bouquet of peach roses, the card with the mysterious letter B written on it, the team excited about this new development in Justin’s life, the futility of telling Justin what I feel for him ... these will be, for now, the secret sources of my misery.