

Snakes in the Cane

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Enter Into The Cane. Free Admission.

Snakes wind their way down foot-trodden dirt paths that meander through brakes of sugar cane that grow tall, thick, and dense in the sunlight. I stand hidden in the cool greeny shadows sucking sweet nectar from the end of a cut and peeled reed. I dig the toes of my sandals into the dirt and pull my t-shirt from my body. It is hot and I am sweating and I squint against the glare, but a breeze cools my cheeks. I watch the snakes without fear, knowing they will leave me alone if I return the favor. The sugar cane juice is refreshing. I spit out the gnawed fiber and chew some more.

I am seven, Manila-born and –raised. I have been sent to live with a grand-aunt in Bacolod City while my parents work out the details of their separation.

They put me on a plane but I do not remember who went with me or what luggage they packed. I know I would not have left without my favorite books, my mother's *Nancy Drews* and *Hardy Boys* and *Bobbsey Twins*. I want to bring my baby sister, but I am told she has to stay behind.

"Be good," says my mother. "Study hard." Maybe she told me that when she took me inside the big house on the *hacienda* to meet her mother's sister.

Lola Bennett had silver hair, fair skin, a thin Spanish nose, and the attitude that goes with all that. She was a widow, *viuda de Araneta*, when she married the swarthy Ismael, he of the tobacco-scented, raisin-wrin-

kly skin. They were kind to the little stowaway planted among them in their old age.

“Sleep in our room,” they said, so on a mattress by the wall at the foot of their bed I slept, even if I was given my own bedroom where my clothes and other things were kept. *Lolo* Maeng snored and *Lola* Bennett switched on the light two or three times a night to use the toilet, pushing open white swinging doors like those to a Wild Wild West tavern that squeaked with a high pitch. Homesickness churned in my gut and I found it difficult to sleep. It wasn’t until after a couple of months that I got used to their creaking rhythms, and settled down to see what would happen to me next.

Lola Bennett’s sprawling bungalow was in Taculing, close to where the airport used to be, on an *hacienda* planted to *tubo* as far as the eye could see. This was during the late 1970s, but even by present standards that house would look fresh and contemporary. It nestled behind high walls across the road from the *tubohan*, sticking out from its surroundings like a crystal in the mud.

The house was built in the center of a large pond, slightly raised on cement pillars above the knee-high level of the water. There was a bridge one had to cross to get over the water to the front door, and for a child it was magic, like a portal to another world.

I had not seen such a house before nor have I seen one since.

Fish Keep Your Soul And It Seeps Out Through Their Gills Into The Water.

Orange-colored carp swam in the pond, decades before raising *koi* became fashionable. After dinner one night *Lola* took several slices of bread and said, “Come with me.”

I followed her out to the pond. I wondered what she wanted the bread for. I was surprised when she tore a slice to pieces and threw them into the water. The carp glided through the water, which boiled in frenzy with their activity, their tails thrashing as they fought over the bread. I was taught it was a waste to treat food in such a fashion, but then I realized it was to nourish the golden fish that darted between and around the pillars that held up the house.

“This is my daily exercise,” *Lola* Bennett said, and it was the first time I heard the word *exercise*. My parents never performed physical activity for

its own sake; at home they lay in bed and read or listened to music. My mother loved Tschaikovsky; my father, Mozart and Streisand. In bed he would hold open a book with one hand, and with the other would dip into a dish which he knew without looking my mother would have placed beside him on the bed—peanuts, banana chips. Once my mother moved the dish away, and my father's fingers groped at the sheet, his eyes still skimming over a page of Gore Vidal. We laughed, and he looked up, eyes not really seeing us, thoughts remote; he found the dish, popped peanuts into his mouth, and went on reading. *Crunch.*

I squatted and dipped my hands into the water, trying to catch the fish. They wove through the water without effort, power in each flick of tail, skirting the pillars that held up the house without crashing into them. I wondered if their presence was a spell that kept up the pillars, if without the fish the pillars and the house would crumble into the pond. I splashed a lot but they were too fast, and they darted between my splayed fingers, their scales glittering in the moonlight, until *Lola* said, "Stop that. It's time to get back into the house."

But the water was cool in the night and I smelled jasmine in the air. It was heady, an unfamiliar scent. I could not have imagined living plants exuding such fragrance. The nights in Manila were not perfumed; and I thought to myself, I like it here very much.

We Eat Peanuts Because They Are Brain Food.

Lolo Maeng and *Lola* Bennett married when they were middle-aged. They had no children of their own together, but *Lola* did, from an earlier marriage to an Araneta. I was, for a time, the child *Lolo* might have sired but never did.

Like many men of his generation from the grand old days before the war, he was stern and aloof toward children and the help, though he did make a sporadic effort to give me some attention.

On the first Saturday of each month he would take me to a clinic in the city for my growth hormone shots that a doctor in Manila prescribed because I was short for my age.

On those days he drove his snappy little red-and-cream Renault 14 himself, and we went zooming down dusty backroads with the windows rolled down and the breeze streaming through our hair, his salt-and-pep-

per hair cut military-style, mine trimmed like a boy's. (I was not allowed to grow my hair long until I was in college.)

"Do you think we're driving too fast?" *Lolo* asked.

I answered with the rictus of a grin.

He laughed and stepped on the gas even harder; I tightened my grip on the leather seat, my neck muscles rigid with fear. There were no seatbelts back then, or at least his car didn't have them. He slowed down when we reached the city where the streets were crammed with people and jeepneys. Only then did I relax.

After I got my shot at the doctor's (pants and panties bunched around my knees, buttocks bared for the sting), *Lolo* stopped by a *suki* for roasted peanuts. The vendor knew him.

"*Toto [Sir], tatlo ka baso liwat?*"

"Yes, three glasses full, the usual," *Lolo* nodded, and the hard brown spheres glistening with oil and grains of salt were scooped up and pattered into a brown paper bag that was soon soaked with grease.

After buying peanuts we would sometimes drop by Lopue's bookstore where *Lolo* allowed me to choose from the latest *Nancy Drews*. Like the *Hardy Boys* and other teen mystery series, they were all hardbound.

Back home *Lolo* Maeng would take a large metal strainer and shake out all the salt from the peanuts and refill his *garapon*, an empty jar of Nescafe coffee, that he kept in a cupboard in the "clean kitchen" of the house.

(Food was cooked by *kusineras* in an outbuilding which housed the "dirty" kitchen and maids' quarters. It was also where the ironing was done, with a weighty cast-iron *plancha* filled with glowing charcoal that I was forbidden to touch.)

I am the only person allowed to share *Lolo's* peanuts, and this made me feel special and loved. Though now, come to think of it, maybe *Lola* just didn't like peanuts.

We Do Not Play With Eggs, She Said.

Bacolod in the late '70s was a sleepy town for the most part, but energetic enough during harvest time. The economy still relied heavily on sugar although many business people knew it was the end of the sweet era

of easy money, when harvests would fill the warehouses with sacks of sugar and *hacenderos'* coffers with sacks of money.

My nanny Violeta (we called her *Nanay*), who was also my mother's nanny until she was sixteen said that "back then"—the 1950s and '60s—was a splendid time, one marked by prosperity and luxury.

"After the harvest, your grandmother, your *Lola Betty*, she'd say, would go to Manila with an attaché case stuffed full of money and spend it all there, or sometimes in Hong Kong, because it was only an airplane ride away."

Lola Betty, *Lola Bennett's* younger sister, was short, *chinita*, and stylish. Creased black-and-white photographs from the '50s and '60s show her in Hong Kong—at the tailor's, at the Peak, in a restaurant—in pedal pushers or heavily-beaded dresses, posing with one well-shod foot in front of the other and a shiny leather handbag slung low over a wrist. She did not smile in these pictures. Her hair was always teased high into a bouffant cast into a solid *ampaw* shape with hairspray.

By the time I was sent to Bacolod she was living with her son, my mother's brother, penniless in a cramped apartment in Malate, because she had gambled away her share of her inheritance from my great-grandparents. She was overly fond of playing mah-jong, addicted to the click-clack of engraved ivory tiles and shouting "Pong!" and "Chow!" and gossiping with her *kumadres* over *cha* and cakes or banana *turon*—sliced plantains wrapped like egg rolls and deep fried with sugar. I heard that sometimes the clear brown liquid in the cups was not tea.

But she was an unlucky player for the most part and lost a house, tracts of land, suitcases of cash.

She never worked a day in her life and was never married.

Nanay Violeta came with my mother to Manila when my mother married at 21, and settled with her there to take care of me and my sister. *Nanay* called me "Nini" instead of "Neni," my nickname; said "bebe owl" instead of "baby oil"; and called rubber flip-flops "smagols." We knew no other word for those slippers until I was in school and learned Tagalog. I learned much later that during the war and after, many necessities, including slippers, had to be smuggled into the country.

In Bacolod we ate a lot of chicken, regularly and to the point of nausea, because *Lola Bennett* ran a huge poultry farm, as well as the sugar

cane plantation. On a couple of visits the farm manager gave me under-sized hen's eggs that didn't pass their quality control inspections. Some were oddly shaped, waisted or conjoined like Siamese twins. I kept several of them under the bed in my room, right on the orange carpeting. Some months later, one of the maids found them. She called my *Lola*, lifted the bed skirt, and pointed to them without saying a word.

My little collection was taken away. "Eggs are not toys," I was told.

Too bad. I liked those eggs, some of them as tiny as quail eggs with pebbly surfaces of calcium carbonate in raised and ridged patterns, random as nature made them.

After that, I was never taken to visit the poultry farm again.

My nanny Mila, was scolded for not watching me carefully enough to know that I was smuggling home rejected eggs. I didn't think she was with us when we visited the poultry farms—she wasn't with me all the time, as far as I remember.

I usually saw her at bath time. In the evening, after a supper of chicken, she would take me to the white-tiled bathroom off my bedroom, switch on the shower, and try to whip up a soapy lather in the hard water which ran out of the pipes.

At first I resented her bathing me, because as I had told her I had been giving myself baths in Manila since I turned seven. She smiled and said, "Your *Lola* told me to," and we both knew there was no arguing with that.

I came to love the way she wrapped me up in thick white towels and rubbed me dry, giving me a quick hug before letting me go. I don't remember anyone else hugging me when I was a child, unless it was the occasional aunt on a courtesy visit.

Don't Cross That Bridge Before You Have To.

After the egg episode *Yayay* Mila whispered to me, "*Nugay abi ham-pang sang pagkaon.* (Don't play with food.) I know other things you can do."

One night she took me out of the house into the garden and handed me a small book, hardbound. There was no title on the cover. I opened it and found it filled with smooth creamy pages, unruled, half-filled with her notes written in flowing cursive with a black fountain pen.

She opened the book to a particular page and pointed to the title at the top: “Moon River.”

“This is a beautiful song,” she said. “Memorize the words.”

She sang it to me in a light soprano. “Moon river, wider than a mile, I’m crossing you in style, some day...”

(That song always brings her to my mind although I have forgotten her face. I buy Moleskine notebooks that remind me of hers, but though I try I cannot discern her features on the milky mirror of the paper.)

I have not been in Bacolod in several months, and I could barely remember my mother’s face, and my father’s. I knew they were both good-looking; that I had never seen my father’s parents because they had died before I was born; and that my mother looked nothing like her mother, except for the diminutive height.

Mila told me only one thing about my grandmother—that she visited the house in Taculing several times and would spend hours at a time conversing with *Lola Bennett*. That was all.

Lola Bennett had never mentioned *Lola Betty* to me. Perhaps my grandmother’s scandal-ridden life which her family had to hush up prevented them from mentioning her. Not that the Lacsons were particularly judgmental; they were a large, inbred family, a sensuous lot that scorned conventions the better to indulge their tastes.

According to one story, *Lola Betty* had a *liaison dangereuse* with her brother-in-law, “the old man Baltao,” as my father always called him, husband to *Lola Betty*’s older sister. My grandmother had a son that she named after him—Eugenio—and he had the Baltao features, the wide Caucasian eyes and the high-bridged nose.

He looked just like my mother, who *Lola Betty* said was the daughter of an army physician. My mother was not told this until she was in college. She had met him only once or twice, and she was told that he was a family friend.

She idolized him. “This is your *Lolo Ting*,” she’d say, showing us a sepia photograph of him as a young man. His hair was slicked back with pomade, cheekbones prominent, lips medium-full, a conventionally handsome Filipino of means. “I wish I knew him better. Don’t I look like him?”

No, I wanted to tell her, you look nothing like him. You look like your brother. Both of you could be halves of the same marble statue, with the thin lips, high noses, and alabaster skin. You look like the old man Baltao, and that is why your mother named you Eugenia.

But I kept my thoughts to myself and allowed my mother her fantasy father.

I wonder why my grandmother had to delude her daughter so, and why her daughter persisted in believing the lie despite the evidence she saw in the mirror. I look at *Lola Betty's* unsmiling images in photographs now and wonder what other swarming secret thoughts are hidden underneath her high bouffant.

Mila asked me to sing “Moon River” back to her. At seven I knew I did not possess a good singing voice, but I knew all she needed to know was if I had learned the words. I had. I found it easy to memorize words that I had seen on a page. Words in my mind fell into patterns that I could grasp on several cognitive levels right away. They took shapes that seemed almost three-dimensional to me. Numbers, however, wandered in my mind in an impenetrable fog, ungraspable like smoke.

She took the notebook from my hands. With reluctance I let it go. There were more words in it that I wanted to read: other songs? poetry? sayings copied down to be re-read at leisure? I wanted to see the shape of the texts because then I would see the shape of her mind. Perhaps she knew this, and this was why she did not allow me to explore the rest of her notebook. Some people only share a part of their minds and hearts; the rest they keep hidden, secret.

Bubbles May Occur In Nature.

There was the time Mila took me out into the garden bearing a basin of soapy water. “I will teach you a new way to play,” she said. I was skeptical—what kind of a game would involve soap and water? I was sure it would be dull. Maybe she would show me how to do laundry. I’d seen it done and it looked boring and tedious. I was ready to sulk, and followed her without enthusiasm.

She made for a *gumamela* bush, plucked a handful of its glossy leaves, and pounded the leaves in the soapy water with a rock. I sat up. This was new. This was different. Mila swished the mixture in the water, formed an

‘O’ with one hand, and blew bubbles at me.

We made rings with our soapy hands and blew bubbles that were strong and did not easily pop even when poked by leaves or sticks. I sent out peals of laughter, and for most of that afternoon puffed myriads of rainbow spheres into being, which glided down the garden path and up into the air to bounce in the light, while *Yayay* Mila watched, beaming.

Inside each rainbow globe was my breath, and as they floated away they exploded and released my essence into the warm Bacolod wind. I believed I would live there always, and made plans for high school and college. *Lolo* Maeng said that when I was old enough he would teach me to drive and give me the snappy red Renault for my own. I wondered how I would be able to reach the pedals when the time came, and hoped that the growth hormones would make me tall, like the green cane out in the fields.

Our Food Is Certified Genetically Unmodified.

Mila also took care of feeding me. I was fed with food that came from the farm. For breakfast it was scrambled or sunny-side up eggs on tin plates, for lunch and dinner fried chicken and rice, never any ketchup. (I missed the UFC banana ketchup we had in Manila.) I don’t remember eating vegetables at all.

We were served meals in the “clean kitchen” off the formal dining area, furnished with 1950s-style folding metal chairs with red leather seats—a set of four—and a matching table.

That kitchen was painted white and was always clean because nothing was actually cooked there. The only food kept in the cupboard there were *Lolo’s* peanuts and plastic canisters of meringue cookies (whipped egg whites and sugar, piped into rosettes and baked till dry and set) for me. That room glows in my mind now, always flooded with light, because a screen door at one end let sunshine in during the day.

Through it I could see coconut trees, ornamental plants, and the spiky Bermuda grass of *Lola’s* well-kept lawn. Green and white and brown are the colors I associate with Bacolod—the colors of sun and earth and garden and fried chicken.

Nowadays I can’t get enough ketchup.

Seafood was served only on special occasions. Platters were brought into the house heaped with juicy red crabs crammed with tasty orange *aligue* (crab fat) and white meat as firm as fish, pink *halabos nga pasayan* (steamed shrimp) as big as my hand, lightly-cooked scallops, unseasoned so that they burst on the tongue with their own sweet flavor, and grilled tuna steaks served with chopped tomatoes and onions.

We seldom had these savory treats, and I wondered why, since *Lola* also owned a fishing fleet—surely we could have been plentifully supplied with crustaceans and fish? Perhaps she was avoiding their high-cholesterol content.

She was a great believer in children's nutrition by supplement. She made me drink an entire plastic Tupperware tumbler of Milo every single night. It was brought by a kitchenmaid into her bedroom, where I slept, on a tray along with a tumbler of water. I was supposed to drink both; I was watched until I had emptied both tumblers, bottoms up. It resulted in my waking up in the wee hours, and going to the bathroom in the dark because I couldn't reach the light switch; proof, I believed, that the hormone injections were worthless.

I love the taste of chocolate and malt, it smells of nostalgia and sentiment, but to this day I can't look at a Tupperware tumbler without feeling like I have to pee.

The Milo was always served in a green plastic tumbler. I don't like green much, either.

And I am afraid of the dark and its terrors, real and imagined, even if I can reach light switches now.

The Incident Of The Ceramic Pig In The Night-time.

I didn't know why *Lola* and *Lolo* insisted I sleep in their room when I had my own room. They made me use my room only to keep my books and clothes in, and to spend time there during the day, mostly reading on the twin bed or on the orange wall-to-wall carpeting, thankfully not fuzzy shag.

At night, I lay on a mattress placed beside a wall at the foot of *Lolo* and *Lola's* bed, right on their green carpeting. Beside me was a carved wooden commode on which was placed the "over-over"—radio equipment to keep in touch with the fishing vessels at sea—and a ceramic pig.

This ceramic pig was a family heirloom. No one could remember where it was bought or where it came from to begin with, but it was meant to be used as a coin bank, because there was a slit on its back. It was about as large as a real piglet, made from white ceramic, and decorated in a diamond pattern with *faux* pearls, rhinestones, and other glittery *bijoux*. Its mouth was open in a smile; its tongue was of soft red felt and its teeth were pearl beads. I would wiggle my fingers into its mouth to touch the tongue, which was the only soft part of the pig, and run my fingers all over its encrustations.

I didn't give that pig a name; somehow it seemed beyond that, for I knew it was older than me. It first belonged to *Lola* Bennett's mother, my great-grandmother, who always wrote her name in her books in spidery copperplate with black ink: *Doña Marciana Ledesma vda. de Lacson*. Naming her pig would have been presumptuous on my part.

That pig loomed large in the family mythos. A faded color photograph from 1968 shows me, less than a year old, pink and chubby, on all fours on a blue chenille bedspread beside that pig, wearing only a toothy grin. People who see that picture comment on the resemblance.

The radio squawked in the early evenings, when the captains of the fishing boats would call in to report. I was in my pajamas lying on my mattress, dreading the arrival of the kitchenmaid with the tray of green Tupperware tumblers of Milo and water, with *Lola* speaking into the handheld microphone: "Benedicta 1, Benedicta 1. Come in, over." *Szquaawwk*. "Ofelia 1, Ofelia 1, come in. *Pila ka bañera sa inyo?* (How many crates did you catch?) Over."

And it went on for what seemed like hours, but was probably less than fifteen minutes. I would listen to their choppy conversation, lulled by the hoarse voices coming in on the speakers of the "over-over," punctuated by *Lola's* "Come in. Over."

When sleep was slow to come, I would stare with wide eyes at the ceiling—or at the pig—and *Yayay* Mila would be sent for. She would turn me onto my side, draping my legs and arms over a *tanday* (a pillow as long as my body), and pat my hip until I dozed off. It was a technique that never failed, and I would employ it decades later with success on my own babies.

Mila would also put a pillow behind my back—"to keep fairies from sleeping beside you," she whispered the first time she did it.

“What fairies, *Yayay*? Can they enter houses and touch people?”

“Yes, for they can do magic. If they sleep beside you, they can enthrall you, and then you would no longer belong to the human world.”

To this day I cannot sleep except on my side, with a *tanday* in front and pillow at my back. Though I know better, I think it would do no harm to keep that pillow behind me as a barricade against the legendary folk who might weave spells of ensnarement and tug at my legs and arms until I tumble with them into their netherworld.

Habits formed in childhood can last forever. Grown-ups are heedless: forgetting that their lightest word, tossed off in jest, or their harshest touch will alter children in unforeseeable ways. They forget that they were children themselves once, minds impressionable like damp clay.

What Is A Family And Where Can I Get One?

Some weeks after my eighth birthday I received a letter from my mother. By then, with the facile resilience of children, I'd almost forgotten I had a mother, a father, and a sister—in fact, that I had a family of my own that was not *Lolo*, *Lola*, *Yayay* Mila, and my Bacolod cousins and aunts.

My mother's letter covered several sheets of ruled school paper (“intermediate pad” with blue lines on cream), written with a blue ballpoint pen in her slanted and tailed *colegiala* handwriting, difficult to read. I had to go over it several times before I could read all the words, not that I understood all of them; for instance, the part where she said that she and my father had *separated* because he was *homosexual*.

I did not know what the words meant. From my own context I took “separation” to mean our lives wouldn't be the same as they used to be. “Homosexual,” I gathered, meant “different” and “not what fathers and husbands are supposed to be.” My sister, she said, was with her and going to a new pre-school—Malate Catholic School—and that they were living with her brother, *Tito* Eugene, and *Lola* Betty in the Adriatico area. The rest of the letter was a blur of justifications and exhortations to do well in school and not bother *Lolo* and *Lola* and to be dutiful and obedient to them.

She said they were having a difficult time and that I was better off where I was. I shrugged; she and my life in Manila seemed remote and alien to what I had become, what they had turned me into by shipping

me off to the Visayas to be brought up in what to me were luxurious and pleasant surroundings. I agreed that I was fine where I was.

I took a pad of Grade II paper from my school trolley and sharpened a Mongol pencil. “Dear _____,” I began (I couldn’t remember what I called her and my father before the separation. I had to reinvent them in my mind, because the change in our situation also altered in an irrevocable way how I perceived their roles in my life.) “Don’t worry about me. I like it here in Bacolod. I hope you and Joanne are fine. I am always good. Thank you for sending the Enid Blyton books. The one about Amelia Jane and her golliwog was funny. Love, Neni.”

The words scored graphite grooves in the paper, each serif marked in careful delineation like the nuns teach us in penmanship class. The marks were so deep that I could see a ghost of the letter when I lifted the sheet. I did not respond to the screed about the separation, about her allegations regarding my father’s sexuality and it being the cause of our family’s dissolution. I understood none of it yet. At that moment it was a reinforcement of the concept that my life from then on would never be the same, which was first borne upon me when my heels sank in Bacolod soil, clutching a worn and stuffed blue rabbit in one hand.

After Bacolod, I stopped using the word “Love” in letter closings to my parents. If I did, I no longer meant it.

But I was eight. All I cared for was my egg collection (while it lasted), and eating *Lolo’s* peanuts from his jar and reading my *Nancy Drews* and dipping my feet into the carp-filled pond under the house, hoping the fish would nibble my toes so I would have an excuse to squeal and run across the lawn of spiky-stiff Bermuda grass that tickled the soles of my feet. My days were filled with the hopes of a child—that I would get taller after my course of hormone shots, that we’d have shrimps again for dinner soon, that we wouldn’t crash into the cane fields when out with *Lolo* in the Renault.

The Three “Rs”—Reading, Writing, And Arikitik.

On weekdays I attended third grade at St. Scholastica’s Academy, where my most interesting classmate had yellow hair and blue eyes and bore the exotic name “Eileen Porter,” a name that could have come out of one of my *Nancy Drews*.

I found her fascinating because she could cuss in purest Hiligaynon. She knew words in the language that I hadn't heard before. How she and her all-American family ended up living in Bacolod, I didn't know, only that her father owned or ran a sugar *hacienda*.

At recess we'd play Chinese jackstones we had made ourselves from gaily-patterned cotton *retazos* and stuffed with *monggo*. This was where our basic sewing and embroidery classes proved useful, and we prided ourselves not only on the dexterity of our hands at play, but also on how well we had sewn our little beanbags.

A set of three beanbags about two inches square, "Chinese jackstones," require extreme dexterity on the players' part. One beanbag—the *pato*—is placed on the back of the hand, and a player has to be nimble to prevent its falling off while daintily picking up first one, then both, of the remaining two beanbags, then tossing them into the air and catching them as they fall.

We also played regular jackstones. The best kind came in a red plastic box with a clear lid through which you could see a shiny red ball and well-made gold-painted jacks that looked almost carved. The poorest kind, the kind no one wanted to play with, had a mud-colored taupe ball that did not bounce consistently; the ball would careen to one side or the other and throw your game off, while the jacks were of cheap, bendable plastic with obvious seams, and beads at the end of each spoke from where they had been torn off a larger sheet at the factory.

The jackstone set in one's pocket could speak volumes about a person's family and financial standing. That early in life, children like us were already learning how to judge one another based on things like monthly allowances, clothes (well-pressed uniform or not), shoes (shiny and new or not), and whether one's mother attended the school events, and whether she wore tasteful or vulgar clothes and how her make-up was applied. Obviously my classmates never saw my mother, so I remained something of a mystery to them, "the new girl from Manila."

Instead of the plastic identification cards schoolchildren wear nowadays, at St. Scho we wore nameplates, white plastic rectangles with pins fastened to their backs. Name and grade level were engraved on the front of the plate in blue. A classmate taught me how to rub crayons over the letters, filling in the letters with colored wax, which could easily be dug out with a

pin and cleaned with a toothbrush, to change the colors as often as desired, or whenever the Benedictine nuns decided to crack down on the practice, something they did once in a while.

I carried my things to school in a blue-wheeled trolley marked in white with the school's name and logo. I was small and the bag was heavy and unwieldy; more often than not the wheels would run over my feet and bruise my toes inside their black Gregg shoes and white ankle socks. Inside the bag were textbooks covered in plastic and school-issued notebooks with blue and white covers. I loved the smell of new books and notebooks, and would inhale deeply of their scent when we received them at enrollment.

In class we used pencils for writing, and collected scented erasers that we traded with one another. A metal sharpener was bolted to the wall, so no one could excuse herself from seatworks or exams by saying that her pencil lead was broken. We looked forward to fourth grade, when we would finally be allowed to use ballpoint pens with blue ink.

My hand cramped when using pencils; the thoughts flowed faster than my hand could write, and often the pencils snapped and broke, and it was too much bother to get up and sharpen them, so I became frustrated and did not write as much as my other classmates did. The words ran around inside my head, though, and I knew that I would need to write them down someday, and somehow leach them all out onto paper, otherwise my head would burst from keeping them all in.

Those hoarded words were my own secrets, hidden under my flat, boy-length hair.

It Is Doubtless That Furniture Can Be Your Friend.

On weekends we stayed home. *Lola* was religious, or appeared to be so—reciting the rosary every night, touching a *stampita* to her head, lips, breasts, and genitals while murmuring a prayer before bedtime, an almost pagan ritual reminiscent of the Fivefold Kiss of Goddess worship. But we never went to the village nor city church because the village priest always came to the house on Saturday afternoons to say anticipated Mass for the family and the household help.

The large narra dining table that could seat twelve served as the altar. The ornately-carved dining chairs were arranged before it, with an embroi-

dered throw pillow on the floor in front of each chair to cushion worshippers' knees. Only the family sat on the chairs; the rest of the household, called in from outside, arranged themselves respectfully on the sofas and against the walls.

After the Mass, when everyone had shuffled out and only a housemaid was left to clean up, I scooped out the melted wax from inside the red glass candle holders and molded it into yellow “ping-pong” balls. The wax was searing hot and I burned my fingers a few times before I learned to wait a bit and allow it to cool somewhat—a lesson, I later discovered, that applied to other things besides molten candles. Such as love affairs.

The dining table was heavy, dark, and shiny. A motif of grapes—fruit, vines, and leaves—adorned its edges. Its legs were also carved with scrolls of foliage. A housemaid sprayed Lemon Pledge on it each morning, rubbing the white flecks of froth into the wood surface till it gleamed like glass. If I tiptoed, I could smell the wax's citrus scent and see my face reflected on the table's surface—all big ears (an inheritance from *Lola* Marciana and my mother), thin cheeks, and buck teeth. I wondered if I would ever grow up to be as beautiful as that table.

At the end of the corridor that led off into the bedrooms, underneath a small window, was a large chest. I was short for my age and the chest was as high as my navel. It was made of brown, polished wood, carved half an inch deep with depictions of curvy clouds and bald men holding wooden staves, long tufts of hair on their chins falling almost to the ground. The lid was heavy and I was never able to lift it to learn what was kept inside. I would clamber over it and run my fingers over the images, revelling in the polished silken feel and gloss of the wood, which felt like glass. Like glass but not quite, and I found that thought fascinating in the extreme, how different materials could share similar attributes.

Lola Bennett saw me one day. “Get down from there. That's a Chinese chest. It is not a toy.”

Again, like the eggs, *not a toy*. Grownups placed many restrictions on things and I had to learn all of them. Jackstones were *toys*. But deformed eggs and furniture that I played with and derived the same enjoyment from, were *not toys*. I appreciated how inanimate objects were more consistent than people, whom I found incomprehensible at times.

And again, there was an unfamiliar word—*Chinese*. I thought the word applied only to beanbags. I thought it meant “toys made with beans.” In this context, it was confusing. Did it describe the carved bald men somehow, the way *homosexual* described my father?

Contrary To Reports, My Aunt Did Not Keep A Snake In Her House On Purpose. It Was An Accident.

I had second cousins who lived in a large house next door. The Gurreas were *Tita* Tinggay, *Lola* Bennett’s daughter and my mother’s first cousin, who taught me how to knit and crochet, and her children: *Manong* Charlie, *Manong* Raymar, and *Manang* Tina. They had a dachshund that chased me all the way from their house to ours, and since then I have been wary of dogs. I much prefer cats, who are generally too lazy to exert themselves to chase anything.

Both *manongs* were much older, in college at La Salle Bacolod; *Manang* Tina also went to St. Scho, but was several years older than me and was in high school. She was fair and pretty, a slim *mestiza* with aquiline features sprinkled with freckles, and I idolized her as younger children do their elder cousins. She taught me how to eat *tubo*, freshly-cut with a *binan-gon* (*bolo* knife) from the fields, peeling and gnawing the ends, sucking the pure sweet nectar, spitting out the stiff fibers damp with saliva.

Manong Mar had a motorcycle which he raced. He came home one day from a race and as he was telling his siblings about how he beat the others “with this!” thumping the bike handlebars with pride, I edged too close to the machine and it seared my leg. I still have the scar, a round pale spot the size of one of the old one-peso coins, the one with Jose Rizal’s head on the obverse and a shield on the reverse side.

Manong Charlie was handsome and later became a Mormon preacher. *Lola* Bennett was angry when I told her. “We are *Catolico cerrado!*” and scolded *Manong* Charlie for leaving the faith, and me for not telling her sooner and only when it was a *fait accompli*. She could have prevented it! Incensed, *Manong* Charlie ticked me off for telling on him. More secrets, and these, it turned out, were ones that I should have kept, to avoid family conflict.

But people always forgot I was only eight. What did I know of grown-ups and their need to conceal and prevaricate? They taught me not to lie,

but at the same time expected me to hide the truth when someone might get into trouble. Understanding when to do this and when to tell the truth was something I had to learn, fast, because this is not only a Filipino thing, but a universal one—things that have the power to hurt are hid, unless there is intent to wound, to inflict pain on purpose.

That family had a *sawa* enter their house once, which slithered out of a drawer their mother opened while looking for crochet needles or something, and the snake was chased out of the house by the houseboy, accompanied by high-pitched screaming from *Tita* Tinggay. Or so the story went.

Home Is Where They Tell You It Is.

I do not miss my mother or my father, and the ache for my sister grows a bit less each day I get used to life amid the cane.

It is summer and school is out. I look forward to fourth grade in June and indulge in some pleasant speculation on how many notebooks I will have, and on the blue ballpoint pens I will buy. Bic? Boring, everyone uses those. Kilometrico? They have that interesting smooth opaque barrel where other brands are transparent. Reynolds? They have a cachet of costliness. Maybe I will be allowed to get them in red and black ink too. I stand in front of the gate in the hot sun and think of going to the dirty kitchen for a slice of watermelon when I see a couple of pairs of shoes appear under the gate. A man's, black leather. A child's, plaid sneakers.

My heart races and my hands get clammy and I know, I *know* that it is my sister and I run. I fly to the gate and open it and there she is, in a pastel dress smiling at me, eyes coal black in her brown face, and I take her hand and drag her inside. My father steps through and smiles—"Hello, Neni," and I feel no love or welcome, only trepidation that my life in Bacolod is over.

My father has come to take me away. He saunters up to the house like he owns it, with the arrogant manner that only he of all the *Datu sa Kutawato's* grandsons possesses. Inside, he talks to *Lola* while I play with my sister, bursting with an unspecific happiness I didn't know I'd feel now we are together again. I take her to see the *koi* in the pond and invite her to unlace her shoes and paddle in the water. She is afraid of getting her feet wet, she says, but she dips a hand in and splashes it about.

Lola calls me into the house. She is agitated, her chest heaves. She hands me the telephone. My mother is on the other end.

“Curse your father,” she says, “taking you from the lap of luxury! But what can we do? We mustn’t stress the old people. They’ve been through enough. Go with him.”

I untwist the fabric-covered cable at the end of the black handset and replace it in its cradle. I look at my father. He sits cross-legged on the sofa on which I’ve never seen a guest, utterly comfortable. Beside him *Lola* is awkward, as if their roles have been reversed and she is the guest, he the owner of this mansion with fish swimming beneath it and holding it up with their golden carp magic.

He is a *homosexual*, runs a whisper in my mind. Does that mean “a man who changes good things into bad?” One who disrupts lives, makes old grand-aunts weep, angers distant mothers? Or does it mean, one who loves his daughter enough to seek her out where she has been exiled in a cane-covered island so he can take her home?

The answer comes much later. Years later.

Just like that, my year in the sugar bowl ends. Housemaids pack my bags in haste. Mila is in tears. I run out of the house, run across the dirt road outside the gate straight into the rows of cane, on and on till I stop, winded, surrounded by tall green plants that rustle in the breeze. I do not cry but dig my toes into the soil, wishing I would grow roots so deep and tenacious that no one will be able to pull me up.

A snake crawls over my right foot. It is green and long and skinny, like sugar cane that has come to sinuous life. It takes its own majestic time, curving its body over the hump of my foot and I let it, without fear, because it and I are one, because I want to crawl after it and hide in its cool dark holes, and stay.

2 May 2013